

*Twentieth century South Asian Christian  
Theological Engagement with Religious  
Pluralism: Its Challenges for  
Pentecostalism in India.*

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the University of Edinburgh  
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In Loving Memory of  
Thankamma Varghese  
K.V. Rajan  
P.V. Thomas  
Mariamma Thomas  
And  
Mariamma Joseph (Palammachhi)

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# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been presented to any other academic institutions other than the University of Edinburgh, to which it is submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis is my own work and is the result of my own research.

Geomon K. George  
August 2004

*Sarvasaktiman Daivam (Almighty God),*

“ASATOMA SAT GAMAYA  
TAMASOMA JYOTIR GAMAYA  
MRTYORMA AMRTAM GAMAYA”

(FROM UNREAL LEAD ME TO THE REAL  
FROM DARKNESS LEAD ME TO THE LIGHT  
FROM DEATH LEAD ME TO IMMORTALITY)

*Birhadaranyaka Upanishad 1:3:28*

## Abstract

Twentieth century, particularly the last fifty years have seen a flourishing of Indian Christian theological reflection on religious pluralism among Syrian Christians, Catholics, and Protestants. Indian Pentecostalism, however, has been reluctant to engage this dimension of theological concern. This thesis, researched, and authored by an Indian Pentecostalist, seeks to redress this situation by examining current models of Indian Christian theological approaches to religious pluralism, and identify issues that, in the opinion of the researcher, present themselves for theological reflection among Indian Pentecostal theologians in their future response to religious pluralism.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part One examines pre-mid- twentieth century patterns of Christian theological encounter with religious pluralism in India. Chapter One explores three adventitious traditions in India – Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Protestantism – and argues that each failed to engage India's religious pluralism theologically. Chapter Two examines nineteenth century and early twentieth century Indian Christian theologians, and demonstrates that, in contrast to the three adventitious traditions, engagement with religious pluralism became an essential component of indigenous Indian theology.

Based on this conclusion, Part Two offers an in depth study of three Indian Christian theologians whose writing were influential in the second half of twentieth century: Stanley Samartha (Chapter Three) who represents a pneumato–centric engagement with religious pluralism; Samuel Rayan (Chapter Four) who illustrates the application of Indian liberation theology to the challenge of religious pluralism; and Wesley Ariarajah (Chapter Five) who represents a theo–centric approach to religious pluralism. Each of these theologians from Indian sub-continent will be examined in his own theological environment, but in assessing their theological ideas, the thesis will identify issues which they raise for Pentecostal reflection on religious pluralism.

Part Three of the thesis focuses on Pentecostalism and religious pluralism in India. Chapter Six reviews the work of the few Pentecostal theologians who address the issue of religious pluralism and draws upon the relevance of selected Pentecostal theologians from outside India. Building upon this precedence, Chapter Seven returns to challenges identified in Part Two, and lays out what, in the considered opinion of the researcher, constitute the bases of an indigenous Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism. The chapter will argue that where manifestations of the Holy Spirit can be identified in the popular religious experiences of Dalit people, Indian Pentecostal theologians have an opportunity to build a theology of religious pluralism that recognizes the activity of God's Spirit in the lives of Dalit people.

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# Introduction to the Thesis

## 1. Preamble

The middle and late nineteenth century<sup>1</sup> witnessed the earliest indigenous Pentecostalism in India which grew rapidly since its formal foundation in 1934, in part because it became a primary vehicle through which people of lower caste origins expressed their opposition to the caste system in Hinduism as well as to the caste-based hierarchy of the Church.<sup>2</sup> This enabled people of different faith traditions to join in the Pentecostal movement on a basis of millennial equality because they just wanted to become people with full dignity before God. So they addressed each other as brothers and sisters. This is in direct contrast with mainline Churches that considered people of lower caste origins as second-class citizens and used caste appellations to address people of lower caste origins, i.e. Chacko Pullayan.<sup>3</sup> Pentecostalism, therefore, became a sanctuary for people who were seeking better social status.

As Pentecostalism grew and established itself, Syrian Christian Pentecostals began to segregate converts from lower caste origins in terms of Church hierarchy and a “routinization of charisma” has taken over.<sup>4</sup> By accommodating itself to the social culture, Indian Pentecostals have moved from their religious origin to a social stagnation. This accommodation into social structure cannot be dealt by fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> In 1860-61, at Tirunelveli, Madras province a Pentecostal like revival occurred followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Travancore in 1874-75.

<sup>2</sup> For Further readings, Pallath, J.J., “From Oppression to Liberation: A Case Study of Pulaya Conversions,” *Integral Mission Dynamics*, (New Delhi: Inter-Cultural Publications) 1996, pp.29-44; Estborn, S., *Gripped by Christ: A Study of Records of Individual Conversions in India*, (New York: Associated Press), 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Koshy, N., *Caste in the Kerala Churches* (Bangalore: CISRS) 1968, p.39; See Samuelkutty, T.S., “The Place and Contribution of Dalits in Select Pentecostal Churches in Central Kerala from 1922 to 1972” (Unpublished Thesis, M.Th.: U.T.C.) 1999; Varughese, V.A., “A Historical Analysis of the Origin and Development of the Pentecostal Churches in Kerala with Special References to its View of Mission” (Unpublished Dissertation, D.Miss.: South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore), 1996.

<sup>4</sup> See Das, Y., “An Evaluation of the History of Pentecostal Dalits in Kerala” (Unpublished Thesis, Th.M.: South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore), 2001.



embedding in the religious ideology and culture which means contemporary Pentecostalism needs to engage with the cultural and religious landscape of India.

Another reason for the growth of Pentecostalism in India is the link between the pre-Vedic spiritual life and the Pentecostal spiritual experience. In other words, converts brought the Dalit spirituality to Pentecostal experiences and practices from a non-Christian context. However, discerning spirituality and beliefs of Dalit people have been ignored or put down by both missionaries and the Indian Church hierarchy. The missionaries influenced by the enlightenment project of the West, never spoke about popular religious beliefs except to dismiss them as nonsense, or “superstitions.”<sup>5</sup> One of the exceptions was Reverend Machin. In 1934 Machin wrote on “evil Spirits” in *the National Christian Council Review* seeking advice on dealing with demonic possessions. He wrote: “Can we [missionaries] in India take the rather materialistic nineteenth-century view that all this is nonsense?”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there was not even a single response to his request. He reported that in some parts of India, belief in evil spirits is a “great hindrance” to convert people from lower caste origins.

This pattern of rationalizing and ridiculing has continued with Indian Christian leaders. The Christians of higher caste origin and those educated in the West “reinforced ecclesiastical derogation of popular beliefs by dismissing them as the ‘superstitions’ of simple and uneducated co-religionists.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, even the Indian liberation theologians who have analyzed the social structure to alleviate poverty and injustice have failed to engage Dalit religions.<sup>8</sup> According to their view, there is no place for the work of miracles, a spirit world, answers to prayers and related ideas. They espoused a Christian faith based on rational and logical arguments, not in terms of the manifestations of the Spirit in the lives of the people who were sick and destitute. Thus,

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<sup>5</sup> Caplan, L., “Certain Knowledge: The Encounter of Global Fundamentalism and Local Christianity in Urban South India,” *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations*, Wendy James (ed.) (Routledge: London), 1995, p96.

<sup>6</sup> Machin, “Evil Spirits,” *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. 30, 1934, p.482.

<sup>7</sup> Caplan, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, S., *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, (OUP: London), 1999, pp.43-48.

the majority of Indian Christians looked in vain to their indigenous Christian theologians for a satisfactory response to their traditional explanations of evil and misfortune.<sup>9</sup>

In the Pentecostal community, cosmology of spirits and popular ideas about affliction and misfortune are “not neglected or ridiculed as they were in the early mission and later indigenous orthodox context.”<sup>10</sup> Rather Pentecostals acknowledge that misfortune is brought by evil agents, and identifies them as the servants of Satan. Lionel Caplan a reader in Anthropology with reference to South Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, provides an example of a study among CSI members in Madras found that

the majority of non-elites, like the Hindus among whom they live and work, continued to attribute many if not most kinds of everyday misfortune (joblessness, illness, unhappy marriages, disobedient children, examination failures, etc.) to either sorcery (*suniyam*), the capricious acts of evil spirits (*pey*), or other kind of mystical agents.<sup>11</sup>

The challenge for Pentecostals is to discern the Spirit of God in the cosmology of spirits. This thesis will argue that the Holy Spirit in terms of manifestations of the Spirit would distinguish between true and false spirits. Indian Pentecostals understand the manifestations of the Holy Spirit as a transforming and an empowering experience. Being filled with the Holy Spirit enables people to do extraordinary things otherwise impossible. Pentecostals believe that living in the life of the Spirit can lead to deliverances from all types of oppressions even physical healing. The Holy Spirit is therefore seen as encompassing all of life’s experiences and afflictions. Thus, in dialogue with popular religious traditions, it will be argued that where such manifestations of the Spirit are identifiable, Indian Pentecostals should be open to the possibility that God’s Spirit is a likely force in the spiritual experiences of such believers.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Caplan, L., *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford) 1987, p.224.

<sup>11</sup> Caplan, L., op.cit., 1995, p.95.

## 2. Necessity for Research

The thesis therefore will argue that, refusing to contextualize Pentecostalism is a luxury Indian Christians can no longer afford. Despite the plurality of religions that exist in India, Pentecostals accommodate themselves in-terms of co-existence. While Pentecostals can continue this approach, it will be at the peril of alienating Pentecostalism as a foreign religion and might become a stumbling block in its pursuits of furthering its cause in the Indian soil. A relevant theology, therefore, has to be contextual. Thus, “doing theology contextually is not an option... it is a theological imperative.”<sup>12</sup> The shift is a sign of “maturity and growth.”

Dependence on imported theology is another reason Pentecostals need to engage with religious pluralism. After decades of relying on imported western theology, the latter part of nineteenth century and twentieth century witnessed Indian Christian theologians interpreting the Gospel in engagement with other religious traditions in order for the contextualization of the Christian faith. Some of these approaches are systematic treatments of a particular Indian Philosophical school while others engage in critical usage of Hindu concepts and terminologies. Although differences of approach, methodology, and scope separate these enterprises, there is a common desire to articulate an Indian Christian theology from within the philosophical, religious and social realities of India. Indian Pentecostal theologians need to address concrete situations in an effort to develop an authentic contextual theology.

## 3. Rationale for Research

The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to examine Indian Christian theological approaches to religious pluralism to assess the challenge for Indian Pentecostals and then to offer a basis for an Indian Pentecostal approach to religious pluralism. In this process, the thesis will explore ways in which Indian Pentecostals might embrace these emerging perspectives, while remaining true to Biblical fidelity.

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<sup>12</sup> Bevans, S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1992, p.1.

### 3.1 Research Questions

From the perspective outlined above, the thesis will pursue two primary questions, and several minor questions, as follows:

- Primary Questions:
  - In the emerging patterns of religious pluralism in India, what challenges/questions do they present to Indian Pentecostals?
  - What would be an Indian Pentecostal basis for engaging with religious pluralism?
- Minor Questions:
  - Why is religious pluralism significant to the Indian Christians?
  - In the emerging pattern of religious pluralism, how have Indian Christian theologians responded to this issue in recent times?
  - What constitutes Christian mission in the context of religious pluralism?
  - How is the Christ-event to be understood in light of religious pluralism?
  - Is there a common theme arising from these various theologians?
  - What limitations, if any, can be detected in their conclusions?

### 3.2 The argument of Thesis

In this thesis I will put forward the hypothesis that the Pentecostal openness to the Dalit religious traditions can provide basis for a theological reflection in engaging with religious pluralism.

- It will be argued that engagement with religious pluralism was not a consistent feature of “missionary” theology in India.

- It will be argued that indigenous Indian Christian theologians from 19<sup>th</sup> century Banerjea onwards, unlike the missionary tradition, have taken a much more explorative approach to the Hindu tradition.
- It will be argued that an Indian Christian theology of religions based on “higher” Hinduism is only for a minority of people who are literate in both Hinduism and Christianity and who are concerned with the contextual reality of Hinduism itself. However, for Christians of lower caste origins, a theology of religious pluralism based on “higher” Hinduism would be viewed as just another expression of power by Christians of upper caste origins.
- It will be argued that current Indian Christian theologies of religious pluralism have not succeeded in “establishing inherent coherence” nor “winning universal assent” least of all among the 90% Dalit majority of Indian Christians.
- It will be argued that Indian Pentecostals have not addressed this issue of engaging with people of other faiths. Nonetheless, viewing popular religions of the Dalit traditions as having theological value and manifestations of the Spirit as the criteria for discerning between true and false “spirits” could be the mark of a distinctive Pentecostal contribution to this theological discourse. In doing so, Indian Pentecostals are providing a “different” perspective that is absent in the writings of other traditions.

#### 4. Organization of the thesis

This thesis will be divided into three parts:

- Part One will examine the early Christian theological reflection on religious pluralism in India.
- Part Two will evaluate the current Christian theological reflection on religious pluralism by Indian Christian theologians.

- Part Three will demonstrate a basis for an Indian Pentecostal theological approach in a religiously pluralistic context.

The main focus of this research found in Parts Two and Three, consists of contemporary Indian Christian theological discourses on religious pluralism and examines what important issues have arisen, as well as enduring questions which the Indian Pentecostals need to take seriously if an adequate approach to religious pluralism is to be developed. Part One, therefore will demonstrate Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Protestantism lacked any systematic engagement with Hindu tradition, except for the polemical purpose of negating them. To the contrary it was the Indian Christian theologians from 19<sup>th</sup> century Banerjee onwards that laid the foundations for contemporary Indian Christian reflections on religious pluralism.

Chapter One examines the early Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Protestantism engagement with religious pluralism was not a consistent feature of “missionary” theology in India.

Chapter Two offers an overview of early approaches to indigenizing Christian faith in the context of modern Hinduism and Indian culture, and developing “authentic” Indian expressions of Christian faith.

Chapter Three examines Stanley Samartha’s Pneumatological approach to the Christian understanding of religious pluralism that recognizes the wider work of the Spirit in the people of other faiths in developing a social framework for inter-religious dialogue.

Chapter Four examines Samuel Rayan’s liberative model which features an adaptation of liberation theology and Rahner’s theological approach to other religions by suggesting that in the Indian context grace is especially present among the poor of all religions who deserve to be recognized as an inter-religious reality.

Chapter Five examines Wesley Ariarajah's theocentric proposal for engaging with religious pluralism from the theological ground of God at the centre. This approach affirms the freedom of God as distinct from doctrinal way of understanding God. Ariarajah rejects the missionary approach to people of other faiths during the colonial period and urges the Church to embrace a "new" approach that sees God not Jesus Christ at the Centre of the Christian faith.

Chapter Six analyzes the Indian Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism which demonstrates an almost neglect of a theological discourse on the plurality of religions and examines global Pentecostal resources available for a distinctive Pentecostal reflection on religious pluralism.

Chapter Seven examines issues laid down by other Christian traditions that Pentecostals cannot ignore and offer an anthropological analysis of the popular religious beliefs of Dalit religion which lies at the heart of the Pentecostal experience and worldview.

Chapter Eight offers a theological summary of the issues raised in this thesis and suggestions for further research.

The thesis is not just a theoretical exercise in Christian theological reflection. Rather the issues taken up in this study are rooted and emerge from within the cultural, religious and philosophical context which has nurtured and sustained my Christian theological reflection. It is through Indian Pentecostal spectacles that I see the issue of the relation and impact of religious pluralism on Christian thought. Every effort will be made to voice other opinions on this issue mainly as a form of criticism to the above.

Recognition is given to the legacy of western history and western theology. The Western missionaries gave the Indian Christians not only the Bible but also an understanding of the Christian teaching. As a result, one cannot ignore the influence of western theology in developing an Indian Christian theology. However, Indian Christians have begun to construct a theology from their own epistemological framework using local resources.



Recognition is also given to the fact that the centre of Christianity has shifted to the non-western world and Christianity now co-exists among plurality of religions. The decline of Christianity in the west and the growth of Christianity in the non-western world have significant implications on the shape of theology for non-western countries and for the wider Church. In India, Christianity is often portrayed as a foreign religion. However, Christianity is dynamic, vibrant and creative in engaging with the fabric of Indian thought, thus being contextualized in Indian realities.

## 5. Delineation of terms

### 5.1 Pentecostalism

David Barret, an editor of the World Christian Encyclopaedia and one of the authoritative figures of worldwide Christian growth, observes that Pentecostalism in India has grown to approximately 33.5 million people by the middle of the year 2000, ranking fifth in the world.<sup>13</sup> In an article on “Pentecostalism in India: An Overview,” Stanley M. Burgess, a Pentecostal scholar, divides the history of Pentecostalism in India into four stages.

The first stage was Pentecostalism in India before 1906.<sup>14</sup> Gary B. McGee, a Pentecostal historian at the Assembly of God Seminary in Missouri, suggests that Pentecostal phenomenon in India preceded the Azusa Street revival in California, U.S.A. by fifty years.<sup>15</sup> One of the principle figures was John Christian Aroolappen. A missionary records the event taking place in 1860, “there was a baptism of the Holy

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<sup>13</sup> According to David Barret, there are 1, 253, 041 classical Pentecostals. There are 5, 032, 741 Charismatics and 27, 234, 219 Neo-charismatics. See Barret, D. and Johnson, T., “Statistics Global,” Burgess, S., *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids), 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Burgess, S.M., “Pentecostalism in India: An Overview,” *Asia Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4/1 2002, p.87.

<sup>15</sup> McGee, G. M., “Pentecostal Phenomenon and revivals in India: Implications for Indigenous Church Leadership,” in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1996, p.114; Chedith, G., *Keralathile Christahva Sabhakal* [The Christian Churches of Kerala- Mal] (Oriental Institute of Religious Studies Publications: Kottayam, Kerala), 1989, pp. 327-29.



Spirit which filled the members of this Church with a holy enthusiasm; and caused them to go everywhere preaching the gospel, in demonstration of the Spirit and power.”<sup>16</sup>

The second stage of the development and growth of Pentecostalism in India was from 1906-1960.<sup>17</sup> It is well known that the western Pentecostal movement originated in Topeka, Kansas on January 01, 1901 when Agnes Ozman, a student at Bethel Bible College who was studying under Charles F. Parham was filled with the outpouring of the divine Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in unknown tongues and thereafter expanded to different parts of the United States and to other countries.<sup>18</sup> The classical Pentecostal movement by the missionaries came to Kerala in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1909, an American missionary, George Burg, came with the message of Pentecost to Kerala. He came as a preacher in the Brethren convention held at Kottarakara, in Central Travancore. In 1911, Burg returned to Travancore with Charles Cummins, Miss Aldwinkle and Miss Bouncil. Miss Aldwinkle and Miss Bouncil were British missionaries who had had the experience of Spirit baptism at a revival meeting at Coonor, India in 1908. After this experience, they had become Pentecostal missionaries. At this time an independent fellowship at Thuvayoor, near Adoor, accepted the Pentecostal faith because of Burg’s meeting. While missionaries were actively participating in Pentecostal evangelism, it was through the native Pentecostal believers, evangelists and missionaries that Pentecostalism in India grew. As A. C. George, an Indian Pentecostal scholar, comments “without nationals [natives] there would be no Pentecostal history in South India.”<sup>19</sup> The natives helped the foreign missionaries “as translators, managers, editors of magazines, supervisors of constructions, and above all as evangelists...”<sup>20</sup>

The third stage is the Catholic charismatic movement in India.<sup>21</sup> According to Burgess, the Catholic charismatic movement in India has its origin in 1972 when Minoo

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Burgess, S.M., op. cit., p.89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>19</sup> George, A. C., “Pentecostal Beginnings in Travancore South India,” *Asia Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4/2 2002, p.230.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Burgess, S.M., op. cit., p.94.

Engineer, a young Parsi civil engineer who was a student at Fordham University converted to Catholicism through his involvement with Charismatics. In the same year two Jesuit priests Fr. Fuster and Fr. Bertie Phillips, who were also in the United States for research returned to India as Charismatics. These early Catholic pioneers conducted various meetings throughout Maharashtra state and different parts of India. In 1974, thirty Catholic charismatic leaders came together in Bombay to hold first National Charismatic convention and to begin a journal, *Charisindia*. This movement was started with Mathew Naickomparambil. He received the Spirit baptism in the early 1970's and received many spiritual gifts such as healing and visions. One of the leading Catholic charismatic retreat centres is at the *Potta Divine Retreat Centre*, north of Cochin, Kerala state built in 1990. Retreats are conducted every week of the year with an average of 15,000 people per week and up to 150,000 at the five-day conventions.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth stage is the Indian Neo-charismatics.<sup>23</sup> The neo-charismatics consist of independent, indigenous, and other groups who probably do not have any connections with classical Pentecostalism. This understanding of the development of Pentecostalism in India addresses the issue of the non-western beginnings of the Pentecostal movement.<sup>24</sup> In summary, the thesis does not make a distinction between Catholic Charismatics and Christian Pentecostals. A Pentecostal approach draws upon Charismatic experience and integrates them into developing a theology of religious pluralism in India.

## 5.2 Dalits

It is difficult to grasp the Pentecostal movement without an understanding of the historical and cultural application of "*Dalit*", its backgrounds, and the connotations of the word Dalit. The Dalits can be traced back to almost 3500 years. It is recognized that they are the original inhabitants of India until the invasion of the Aryans. The Aryans came from the Northwest and colonized the indigenous people of India. The Aryans used militaristic as

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.95.

<sup>23</sup> Burgess, S.M., op. cit., p.95-97.

<sup>24</sup> See Anderson, A., "Pentecostalism in East Asia: Indigenous Oriental Christianity?" *Pneuma*, Vol. 22/1, Spring 2000, pp.115-132.

well as religious and psychological methods to enslave them. Rig-Veda records the systematic exploitation and oppression of these people.<sup>25</sup> The Aryans perceived the indigenous people as culturally inferior and ritually unclean. Out of this belief came forth the *Manusmriti* theory and the *Varna* theory that classifies the caste according to occupation and degree of pollution.<sup>26</sup> The *Manusmriti* theory states that there are four *varnas* that were divinely preordained from the very beginning.<sup>27</sup> The problem only multiplied with the encounter with Muslim, British and with the dominant powers in the independent India despite various Dalit movements.<sup>28</sup>

Who are these Dalits? The Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra published a Dalit manifesto in Bombay in 1973 which defines Dalits as “members of scheduled caste and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless, and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the realm of religion.”<sup>29</sup> The term Dalit is derived from the root word *Dal* in Sanskrit, which is defined as “burst, broken, or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed or destroyed.”<sup>30</sup> There were many names to indicate Dalits such as Harijans, exterior castes, scheduled castes and untouchable among many.<sup>31</sup> It is only within the past few decades that the term Dalits has been used to designate the untouchables.

It must be clarified that not all Dalits are Christians. The Christian Dalits experience the worst form of oppression and marginalization from the society. The Indian government does not permit Dalit Christians to have economic benefits or political representation

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<sup>25</sup> Massey, J., *Down Trodden* (Geneva: WCC Publications), 1998, p. 12

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.12

<sup>27</sup> These are: from the mouth of Purusha, the self-existence one, came the Brahmins, from his arms came the Kshatriyas, and from his thighs came the Vaishyas. And from his feet came the Sudras. These are the four original varnas. Other castes resulted out of alliance between members of the four varnas. Alliance resulting from marriage was the worst of its kind. The dalits do not belong to any of the above caste system. The dalits are the Arvanas –people who are out of the varna dharma or caste system.

<sup>28</sup> The footprint of the modern Dalit movement first began in the northern villages of India where the Dalits unified to fight for a change in their lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a 19<sup>th</sup> century reformer and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who is known as the father of the Dalits, dedicated to the cause of the Dalits.

<sup>29</sup> James M., “Dalit” *PCR Information: Hear the Down Trodden speak* (Geneva: WCC Publication), 1990, p. 69

<sup>30</sup> Massey, J., op. cit., 1998, p. 3

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.2.

even if they have membership in their distinctive caste community. In 1950 (later amended in 1956) the president of India mandated that the constitution of India gives identification as Scheduled castes only to those who adhere to the Hindu and Sikh religions. Secondly, even if they pursue governmental assistance, they are viewed with suspicion by the community because of the assumption that they are receiving or have already received aid whether it be financial or other from the missionary (mostly foreign). Thirdly, The Dalit Christians are objects of degradation and contempt from the upper caste Christians. Finally, the Dalit Christians themselves are divided among sub-caste by religious denominational basis.<sup>32</sup> All these variables add up to the economic, social and ideological oppression of the Dalits.

### 5.3 Contextual theology

There are various definitions for the term 'theology' in the history of Christianity. The word 'theology' derives from two Greek words *theos* (God) and *Logos* (Word). Theology is therefore a discourse about God- a systematic analysis of the nature, purpose and activity of God through the resources of human reason and experience.<sup>33</sup> Theology, as I conceive, is a reflection of human activities in its effort to understand and interpret God's presence and purpose through critical engagement with the context of one's culture. This quest for God's presence and purpose becomes powerful in the existential situation of people in a particular period in history. The starting point for theologizing is interpreting God and God's activity against the backdrop of the particular historical and cultural context.

The term contextualization derives from the word contextualize, which means to "put into relevant conditions and circumstances or context."<sup>34</sup> In Christian theology, it originated from the context of cross- cultural communication of the Christian witness. It was first used in 1972 in a report to the Theological Education Fund entitled *Ministry in*

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<sup>32</sup> Gnanavaram, K., "Dalit Theology and the Parable of the Good Samaritan" *Journal for the study of the New Testament*, Is.50 June 1993, p. 70

<sup>33</sup> O' Collins, G., and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of theology*, (London: Harper Collins), 1991, p.240.

<sup>34</sup> Ukpong, J.S., "What is Contextualization?" *Neue Zeitschrift Fur Missionswissenschaft*, 43/3, 1987, p.161.

*Context: the Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Funds (1970-1977).* Soon after “contextualization” was echoed at the Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization held in July 1974. This conference had as its theme “The Gospel, Cultural Contextualization and Religious Syncretism.” In contextualization, the Christian message is to be made relevant into all social relations into which Christianity is introduced.

Since contextualization is the means by which the Christian message is communicated in a context, the societal patterns of social relations needs to be examined closely. As Ukpong writes, “in putting the Christian message in context it is both the conditions of the society and the frame of mind or the conceptual paradigm with which one analyses the context that determines the contextual typology that emerges.”<sup>35</sup>

Indigenization is one such typology that emerges within which contextualization is done. Indigenization is a framework by which one attempts to make Christianity an indigenous religion of the society concerned. “It seeks to create dialogue between the indigenous thought system and European Christian thought system for the purpose of mutual understanding, interpretation and transformation.”<sup>36</sup> Ukpong identifies two models of the indigenization typology. These are the translation model and the inculturation model. The translation model is based on “a theology of Christian revelation that assumes the existence of a gospel core or kernel of the Christian message that can be identified and separated from cultural expressions.”<sup>37</sup> According to those who hold this model, the gospel is clothed in cultural expressions, and the task of contextualization is to replace one set of garment with another depending on context. This process involves integrating local cultural elements to the structure of the Church. However, the format itself never changes.

There are two varieties of this translation process known as formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence. The formal correspondence involves “the direct substitution of local elements for foreign ones.” This for example involves the introduction of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

indigenous symbols into the Christian religious rituals without changing the format of the rite. The dynamic equivalence entails “looking into the local culture for alternative forms of expression.” Those who identify with this model attempt to express the original gospel message with a local form of its dynamically equivalent expression. Examples of this include Church hymns whose lyrics and musical accompaniments are locally suited. Ukpong posits;

This model of contextualization, though useful at the concrete level like in the area of liturgical music and vestments, does not prove very useful in the area of theologizing.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, many prefer the inculturation model. The inculturation model is based on “a theology of Christian revelation that takes seriously the historical circumstance of revelation and does not separate the divine message from its cultural expressions.”<sup>39</sup> The goal of the theologian in this model involves “rethinking the Christian message in the light of the local cultural background and re-expressing it in terms of the local cultural idiom.”<sup>40</sup> In other words Ukpong writes, inculturation takes place “at the point where biblical exegesis, the Church’s theological tradition and the local cultural perception meet.”<sup>41</sup> This thesis will argue that the contextualization of Pentecostalism in India needs to take the social reality of poverty and religious pluralism seriously.

## 5.4 Indian Christian Theology

Raymond Panikkar firmly believes that the western theological reflection has not exhausted all aspects of theologizing. He gives several arguments for the need for an Indian Christian theology. He starts with suggesting that “faith” is not limited or conditioned by any particular formulation or doctrine. Furthermore, theology, according to Panikkar, is not an intellectual exercise in simply understanding past doctrines. To the contrary, he writes, it is something “new.” Furthermore, since theological reflection

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.166.

<sup>39</sup> Ukpong, J.S., p.166.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



takes place in a particular time and place, it is historical. Therefore, Panikkar argues the western understanding of theology is conditioned by the historical realities of the west.<sup>42</sup>

Indian Christian Theology refers to the Christian theological activity that seeks to articulate the meaning and significance of the Christian faith in relation to the aspirations and challenges of the people of India. By definition, Indian Christian theology is contextual. However, Christian theology simply did not emerge with the advent of Christianity in India. O.V. Jathanna, current principal of the United Theological College, Bangalore, points out several reasons for the delay in developing an Indian Christian theology. He points out that for a long period of time Christian theology was imported from social, religious and political contexts. Christian traditions such as Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches had well developed belief systems before arriving in India and consequently, the Indian churches inherited them as a legacy from the “mother” church.<sup>43</sup>

The fear of distorting the meaning of the Christian message by using Indian categories hindered the development of an Indian Christian theology. When Christian missionaries arrived in India, by and large they had a negative view of Indian philosophies and religions. As a result, they did not feel any need to utilize the Indian philosophical and religious categories to articulate the Christian message.<sup>44</sup>

When there was an attempt to use the local categories, it often used the dominant religious-philosophical traditions of India. While this was helpful to many converts who had their origin in the upper castes, the majority of the converts came from lower castes. Consequently, early attempts to develop an Indian Christian theology “remained both remote and alien to most of the people.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Panikkar, R., “Indian Theology: A Theological Mutation,” *Theologizing in India*, Amaladoss, M. (ed.), (Theological Publications in India: Bangalore), 1981, pp.27-30.

<sup>43</sup> Jathanna, O.V., “Indian Christian Theology: methodological Reflections,” *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 18/2-3, April-September 1986, p.60.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Developing an Indian Christian theology is also hampered by the fact that a pan-Indian Christian theology is ineffective due to its diverse pluralism within each religio-cultural tradition. Thus, “any attempt at formulating the Christian faith exclusively in relation to the classical forms of this or that religio-cultural strand of India was not of much help.”<sup>46</sup> Despite this delay, Robin Boyd observes that:

Indian Christian theology has arrived! It is far from negligible in volume, it is marked by a lively concern to grapple with the problems of witnessing to the Gospel in the Indian cultural environment, and it represents a wide variety of traditions and viewpoints.<sup>47</sup>

## 5.5 Religious Pluralism

Different interpretations of religious pluralism have been developed. In particular, M. M. Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of religious pluralism: 1) Scientific approach, which attempts to understand the diverse religious beliefs in its various expressions through rational and comparative approaches; and 2) confessional which evaluates other religions from a particular faith perspective.<sup>48</sup>

The pluralistic situation in India shows that various religions have co-existed. This religious context of India can be categorized through the scientific comparative study. Nonetheless, the multi-faith situation in India requires not just the scientific study of religions. This is because engagement with religious pluralism occurs not between religions but between committed people of different faiths. Accordingly, religious pluralism itself cannot be explained or understood without considering one's faith commitment.

While the patterns in Christian theology of religions as developed by Alan Race have become the dominant model (exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism), many theologians have expressed their discontent with this theological formulation. According to M.M.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.61.

<sup>47</sup> Boyd, R., *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (CLS: Madras), 1975, p.255.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, M.M., *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, (WCC Publications: Geneva), 1987, pp.3-7.



Thomas all religions including Christianity have a combination of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Therefore, he writes, there cannot be “a classification of Christian positions as solely exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist.”<sup>49</sup> Paul F. Knitter acknowledges that the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is “limited, possibly dangerous.”<sup>50</sup> Gavin D’Costa states that he soon found this typology to be “faulty.”<sup>51</sup>

In recent years there have been various Christian attempts in engaging with the plurality of religions. Harold Coward characterizes Christian approaches as “theo-centric”, “christo-centric”, or “dialogical”.<sup>52</sup> Paul Knitter offers another classification using four models: “conservative” (one true religion), “mainline protestant” (salvation only in Christ), “Catholic” (many ways, one norm), and “Theo-centric” (many ways to the centre).<sup>53</sup> It is fair to conclude, therefore, that despite various reflections on religious pluralism, there is no universal consent. They therefore reflect a further pluralism in Indian Christian theology of religions.

For the purpose of this thesis, a different way of classifying Christian theological approaches to other religions is preferred in the models of Pneumato-centric, Liberative and Theo-centric because these apply more accurately to the three South Asian theologians that will be examined. These three approaches to religious pluralism are attempts to overcome the problem of exclusivism in Christianity. Exclusivism appeals to the Biblical witness that Jesus Christ is the only way for salvation. “It appeals to what for many is a self-evident biblical witness; it gives a central function to the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Inclusivism believes in the basic reality that the revelation of God can be found in all cultures and that Jesus Christ represents the fulfillment of human quest in

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, M.M., “A Christ-Centered Humanists Approach to Other Religions in the Indian Pluralistic Context,” *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, D’Costa, G. (ed.), (Orbis Books: New York), 1990, p.58.

<sup>50</sup> Knitter, P. F., *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1996, p.26.

<sup>51</sup> D’Costa G., “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” *Religious Studies*, Vol.32, 1996, p.223.

<sup>52</sup> Coward, H., *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1985.

<sup>53</sup> Knitter, P.F., *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1985.

<sup>54</sup> Race, A., *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, (SCM Press: London), 1983, p.24.

relation to God. “To be inclusive is to believe that all non-Christian religious truth belongs ultimately to Christ and the way of discipleship which springs from him.”<sup>55</sup>

Pluralism acknowledges world religions as different paths to the same reality.

“Pluralism in the Christian theology of religions seeks to draw the faiths of the world religious past in a mutual recognition of one another’s truths and values, in order for truth itself to come into proper focus.”<sup>56</sup> In different ways the three theologians to be discussed in this thesis – Stanley Samartha, Samuel Rayan, and Wesley Ariarajah- are representatives of pluralist theologians. As pluralist theologians, they each accept salvation outside the Church. Each does so on a different theological basis, however.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Criteria for selecting Indian Theologians

Given this thesis topic, my treatment is necessarily going to be selective, but my purpose is to select the writings of those who have made a significant contribution to the development of Christian theology on the topic of religious pluralism. More importantly, each Indian Christian theologian approaches the issue of religious pluralism from a different theological basis. In this thesis, it will be argued that Stanley Samartha represents the Pneumato-centric approach, Samuel Rayan represents the Liberative approach, and Wesley Ariarajah represents the Theo-centric approach. Choosing such highly respected theologians, gives an opportunity to identify and formulate the issues Christian theology of religions represent for Pentecostals in engaging with religious pluralism.

These three theologians are contemporaries of one another and in many ways compliment one another. Their interest in religious pluralism arises from their contextual reality. However, they differ in addressing this issue. Samartha’s understanding of the Holy Spirit helps him to re-orient his orthodoxy in a pluralistic context. Samuel Rayan’s concern for the poor engages him with embracing liberative

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.38.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.148.

elements within different religions to fight injustice. Ariarajah is concerned about re-expressing the Churches relation to its neighbor from the affirmation that because God is active in human history, not just limited to one ethnic community or geography, every culture is a theatre for God's action. In other words, nowhere is God's action absent contextually.

Both Stanley Samartha and Wesley Ariarajah are from the Protestant tradition, the former is a member of the Church of South India and the latter a Methodist minister. Rayan is from the Catholic tradition, particularly from the Society of Jesus. Geographically, Samartha from Karnataka, Rayan comes from Kerala, and Ariarajah from Sri Lanka.

## 6.2 Survey of literature

As far as I am aware of, there has not been a single PHD research or any scholarly publications on Indian Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism. However, there is a plethora of published books and articles by Orthodox, Catholic and mainline Protestant Christians in India.

Stanley Samartha was born in 1920 in the South Indian state of Karnataka. His father was a Pastor and his mother was a primary school teacher. Samartha's first degree from 1939-1941 was in economics and history at St. Aloysius' College, a Jesuit institution. In 1941 he joined the United Theological College in Bangalore. After graduating from the United Theological College, Samartha spent two years as assistant pastor and then joined the Basel Evangelical Mission Theological Seminary in Mangalore, Karnataka as a lecturer of theology and religions. He then completed his graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York and later at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. At Union Theological Seminary, Samartha studied under Paul Tillich for a master's degree in theology with the topic "the Hindu View of History According to Radhakrishnan," which was later developed into a doctoral dissertation titled "The Hindu View of History According to Representative Thinkers." After the completion of his doctorate Samartha returned to India and served at various theological institutions as

teacher, administrator and principal before joining the World Council of Churches (WCC). It is his contribution as the director of *the Dialogue Program with other Faiths and Ideologies* at the World Council of Churches that he will be remembered the most. Samarth has published extensively including *Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-religious Relationships*, *One Christ-Many Religions*, and *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*. As well as writing several books, Samarth has also contributed many articles to books and journals.

Samuel Rayan was born in 1920 and earned his doctorate at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1960. He has been a professor and sometime Dean at Vidyajyoti College of Theology in Delhi since 1972, which is one of the important Catholic Seminaries in India. From 1968-1982, he was a member of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission and principal of the Indian School of Ecumenical Theology in Bangalore from 1988-1990. His published articles regularly appear in India and abroad in English and in his native Malayalam. His publications include "Mission after Vatican II: Problems and Positions," "Evangelization and development," "Jesus and the Poor in the Fourth Gospel," *Breath of Fire: the Holy Spirit- Heart of the Christian Gospel*, "Theological priorities in India Today," "the Justice of God," "Wrestling in the Night," and "A spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context." Rayan's work with the Indian Theological Association (ITA) and the Ecumenical Association of Third- World Theologians (EATWOT), has made him a spokesperson for Indian Christian theologians and for third world theologians in general.<sup>57</sup>

Wesley Ariarajah is currently Professor of Ecumenical Theology at the Drew University School of Theology, Madison, NJ, USA. He is a Methodist minister from Sri Lanka and was the director of the subunit for dialogue of the World Council of Churches from 1981-1991. At WCC, he has tirelessly worked to promote inter-religious dialogue. He received a bachelor's degree in science and a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Serampore University, India, and his postgraduate work was done in Princeton

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<sup>57</sup> Kim, K., *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*, (ISPCK: New Delhi), 2003, p.138.

Theological Seminary (Th.M), and the University of London (M.Phil. and Ph.D.). He served as lecturer of the History of Religions and New Testament in the Common Protestant Seminary of the Churches in Sri Lanka. Since 1980's he has been a prolific writer on the subject of ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, and pluralism. His publications include *the Bible and People of Other Faiths; Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Thought; Gospel and Culture, An Ongoing Discussion in the Ecumenical Movement*; and *Not Without My Neighbour- Issues in Inter-religious Relations*. He has also contributed in various journals and in conferences in many parts of the world.

Studies of religious pluralism in India include *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective*<sup>58</sup>, an edited volume of the Annual meetings of the Indian Theological Association held at Alwaye, Kerala in 1988 and at Trichy in 1989. *For all the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*<sup>59</sup> is another resource of Roman Catholic Bishops in Asia on many issues including religious pluralism. Other writers such as Michael Amaladoss have written extensively on theology of religious pluralism in India. In these books, Amaladoss expresses his theological conviction that in the reign of God, Christians share with, and learn from other religions.<sup>60</sup>

Several general surveys on theology of religious pluralism in India have been published. They are as follows: *Dialogue in India: Multi-Religious perspective and Practice*<sup>61</sup>; *The Recovery of Mission*<sup>62</sup>; *Mission in the Spirit: the Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*<sup>63</sup>; and *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Pathil, K., *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Rosales, G., and Arevalo, C.G., *For all the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1992.

<sup>60</sup> Amaladoss, M., *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism and Evangelisation in Asia*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1991; *Life in Freedom: Liberation theologies from Asia*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1997.

<sup>61</sup> Aleaz, K.P., (ed.), *Dialogue in India: Multi- Religious perspective and Practice*, (Bishop's College: Calcutta), 1991.

<sup>62</sup> Ramachandra, V., *The Recovery of Mission*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Kim, K., *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas, M.M., *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, (WCC Publications: Geneva), 1987.

### 6.3 Research Methodology

The study has utilized a theological methodology in examining contemporary Indian Christian engagement with religious pluralism. Three approaches will be used in the analysis of contemporary Indian Christian engagement with religious pluralism. Each approach has its own justification.

Firstly, Dalit centered approach, arising from the traditional cultural and religious beliefs of the oppressed, will be justified by the historical evidence that majority of Indian Christians are from people of lower caste origins. A Dalit perspective pays attention to the Dalit religion and culture as having inherent value for transforming people and history.

Secondly, the anthropological perspective enhances our understanding of Christian theological engagement with religious pluralism. This includes anthropological reflection on, and analysis of the relationship between popular religious beliefs of the Dalit traditional religions and the Pentecostal experience. Special attention is given to the cosmology of spirits and manifestations of the Spirit.

In addition, a post-colonial approach will be adopted in order to give voices which were previously silenced by the hegemony of the West and the hierarchy of the Church in India. For example, Indian Christians of higher caste origin developed theological paradigms based on Brahmanical traditions without taking into consideration the world-view of the majority of Indian Christians.

## Part One

### The Early Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism in India

## Part One

### The Early Christian theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism in India

#### Introduction

The contemporary discourses in religious pluralism in India at the centre of this thesis have been evolving in different stages at different periods. Part One of this thesis will concentrate on the degree to which early Indian Christian theological reflection has been able to effectively engage with religious pluralism.

In this connection, chapter one will argue that the contextualization of Christianity in India has necessitated Christian engagement with Hindu tradition. In particular, Chapter One will examine three historical manifestations of Christian history in India-Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism each having a commonality that they came to India from outside. However, prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, missionary theologians lacked any systematic engagement with Hindu tradition, except for the polemical purpose of negating them.

Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, most Indian Christian contextual theologians engaged Hindu philosophy, mysticism and social thought as the context of their Christian theologies. In this process, Chapter Two will illustrate since the nineteenth century, the Indian Christian theologians have developed several methods, typologies, of engaging Hindu traditions as resources for contextualizing Christian theology.

It will also be shown that Indian Christian theologians began to engage with religious pluralism within the cultural and religious identity that had shaped their minds. Early Christian engagement with religious pluralism was in engagement with “classical”



Hinduism, primarily due to the fact that the early Indian Christian theologians were of upper caste origin. The principle goal therefore was to interpret the Christian faith in light of the rich religious traditions of India. While the survey of the early Christian engagement with religious pluralism in India is significant, it also serves as important background information for understanding the current engagement with religious pluralism in India.

## Chapter One

### The Pre-Modern Transmission of Christianity in the Multi-Religious context of India

#### Introduction

The Indian Christian tradition goes back to the arrival of Apostle Thomas who is believed to have landed in Malabar in 52 A.D..<sup>1</sup> The arrival of a Syrian Christian merchant, Thomas of Cana, at Malabar in 345 A.D. and the subsequent settlement of Nestorian missionaries also contributed to the formation of an early Christian community in India.<sup>2</sup> This chapter is not an attempt at a comprehensive history of Christian theology in India. Several surveys of this field are well documented by other scholars.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the goal of this chapter is to examine the degree to which Dr. V. E. Devadutt's statement that "it is desirable that the Indian Church should enter into a theological heritage arising from its own grappling with the problems of our faith"<sup>4</sup> has materialized in the three historical manifestations of Christian history in India - Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism, and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Protestantism, each tradition having the commonality that they originated as adventitious initiatives into the Hindu religious culture.

There are three main arguments that shape this chapter. Firstly, it will be argued that the Syrian Christian community attempted social accommodation with Hindu culture while remaining in ritual and theological isolation. The Syrian Christian community did accommodate to Indian cultural context by accepting to define itself in relation to the

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, L. W., *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge) 1956, pp.43-65.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart, J., *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise- the Story of a Church on Fire*, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh) 1928, pp.102-134; See Moffett, S.H., *History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol.1 (Orbis Books: New York), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Mathew, C.P. and Thomas, M.M., *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1967; Moffett, S.H., *History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol.1 (Orbis Books: New York), 1998; Neill, S., *A History of Christianity in India*, Vol.1 (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Devadutt, V. E., "What is an Indigenous Theology?" *Ecumenical Review* Autumn 1949, p.43.

Hindu caste system, and operated as a caste within the social cultural context. Secondly, it will show that seventeenth century Roman Catholicism, particularly in terms of De Nobili's cultural and linguistic accommodation, served the purpose of communicating the Gospel in appropriate cultural and linguistic terms. The coming of missionary Protestantism in the nineteenth century, this chapter will argue, demonstrated an openness for accommodation in terms of accepting Hindu cultural and social environment with the clear intention of changing it. In this regard, there were two methods of transformation. The first, represented by Alexander Duff with his exclusivist and confrontational view seeks to displace Hinduism and replace with Christianity. This is in contrast with Farquhar's treatment of Hinduism as a multi-faceted tradition which he attempted to transform from within by the criterion of Jesus Christ whom he saw as the fulfilment of that tradition.

## 1.1 The Syrian Christian Tradition<sup>5</sup>

The historical evidence suggests that the Syrian Christian community were recognized by the Hindus as part of the caste order of Indian society which they accepted. In exchange, Forrester writes, "they were able to preserve down the centuries their Syriac liturgy, their formal orthodoxy, and their priesthood and episcopate; but they became completely oblivious to the wider religious climate of India."<sup>6</sup> In this context, Robin Boyd's assessment is correct that the Syrian Christians have not contributed in so far as it relates to developing an Indian expression of Christian witness. Boyd noted,

It might be expected that the Syrian Church, with its long Indian tradition behind it, would have evolved a distinct type of theology which could be a guide and inspiration to Indian theologians of other, more recent, traditions. It must be admitted, however, that this has not been the

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<sup>5</sup> The "Thomas" Christians became known as Syrian Christians because of Syriac in the liturgy and their allegiance to prelates from Babylon. See Carson, Penelope, "Christianity, Colonialism, and Hinduism in Kerala: Integration, adaptation, or Confrontation?" Frykenberg, R.E. (ed.), *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Cambridge) 2003, p.131.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.351.

case.... There has been little or no attempt to work out a theology in Indian terminology.<sup>7</sup>

Robin Boyd gives two reasons for the failure of the Indian Syrian Church to develop an indigenous expression of Christian faith. The first is the social context in which the Church existed. Boyd writes,

The Church existed for centuries in the midst of an alien, Hindu environment, and as a result became somewhat introspective, fitting into the caste-pattern of society as a special caste but with little if any idea of its responsibility for the evangelism of its non-Christian neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

Duncan Forrester illustrates in *Caste and Christianity*<sup>9</sup> how Syrian Christians were given a high caste status within the caste hierarchy. The Syrian Christians were ranked after the Brahmins and equal to the Nairs and as such they operated as a caste. This was in contrast with Christian converts in later centuries from other parts of India who gravitated to the bottom of the caste system. The Syrian Christian relations with other groups, Forrester comments "were governed by rules which were in no way influenced by their Christian beliefs, and they recognized and observed the whole apparatus of pollution."<sup>10</sup>

L.W. Brown provides further accounts of Syrian Christians engaging in temple celebrations and giving offerings to the temples. Furthermore, the Syrian Christians celebrated Hindu festivals such as *Onam* and Vishnu or New Year's Day.<sup>11</sup> However, the Syrian Christians developed different interpretations of many of the Hindu customs. For example, the fire which signified *agni* for the Hindu, symbolized Christ, the light of the world, for the Christians. In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> Boyd, R., *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (The Christian Literature Society: Madras) 1975, p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Forrester, D., *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, (Curzon Press: London) 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.99.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, L. W., op.cit. pp.167-213.

The customs were fixed and related to the social structure, but the interpretations placed on them were not fixed, and so the Indians welcomed Christians keeping the customs, whatever their own interpretations of them.<sup>12</sup>

Among other cultural interchange and assimilation that are apparent are aspects of marriage ceremonies such as “the tying of the marriage thread round the bride’s neck by her husband and the investing with the marriage cloth.”<sup>13</sup>

Another reason for the lack of formulation of an Indian Christian theological reflection in general by Syrian Christian is due to the “foreign” nature of its liturgy.<sup>14</sup> The theological writings, along with scriptures and liturgy were in Syriac, and were prized as a mark of distinction. The use of Syriac in liturgy and reading of the scriptures meant that most people in the community did not understand the words used in worship and sacred texts. The relative lack of interest in theology led Boyd to conclude that,

The theology of the Syrian Church, found as it is mainly in the liturgy and in formularies for ordination and consecration, has remained entirely Syrian, based on the Syriac language, and, despite its age-long sojourn on Indian soil, theologically as far removed from Indian thought as is Roman or Protestant theology.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2 Catholic Missionary Tradition

The Roman Catholic missionary activities in India began in the early sixteenth century with the arrival of the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506-1552).<sup>16</sup> Unlike the Syrian Christians these Jesuits committed to the missionary communication of the

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<sup>12</sup> Gillman, Ian and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, (Curzon: London) 1999, p.179.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, L. W., op.cit. p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.8. Also, see Robin Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church: The Cultural Context of the Gospel*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge) 1974; Hollis M., *Paternalism and the Church: A Study of South Indian Church History*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 1962.

<sup>15</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> Lopez-Gay, J., “Francis Xavier,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, p.751.

Gospel. Xavier emphasized a “conquest theory” that contrasted Christianity to other religions in terms of good and evil, light and darkness.<sup>17</sup> Boyd documents that Xavier’s method of evangelism paralleled that of “close adherence to Roman Christianity as found in the West, accompanied, unfortunately, by the threat or use of the force of the Portuguese crown.”<sup>18</sup> The general missionary attitude was “the more Indians who discarded their ancestral customs and the closer they adhered to Portuguese ways, the better Christians they would be.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, there were exceptions which counteracted this general attitude. This can be witnessed in the missionary activities of Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656).<sup>20</sup> When Roberto De Nobili arrived in South India in 1605, the Portuguese Christian mission was working almost exclusively among the people of lower caste origins. The upper caste Indians viewed Portuguese customs as disgraceful and refused to become Christians. De Nobili decided to work among the upper caste by becoming “an Indian among Indians” and became known by the name *Tattuwa-Bhodacharia Swami*. He abandoned the symbols of western lifestyle such as wearing leather shoes and eating meat. Instead he adapted a Brahmanic way of life, putting on the ochre robe and appearing like a true *Sannyasi*-guru. He mastered Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit,<sup>21</sup> and has been acclaimed as the first Oriental scholar and the father of Tamil prose. He wrote philosophical and theological expositions of the Christian faith including forty Tamil prose works, three Tamil poetic works, and eight works in Sanskrit and three in Telugu. He was honored with the title *Tattuva Podagar* (teacher of Philosophy).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit., 1975, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Chandran, R. J., “Development of Christian Theology in India: A Critical Survey,” *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, R.S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (eds.), Volume 1 (ISPCK: Delhi) 1993, p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, pp.11-14. See Cronin, V., *A Pearl to India: The Life of Robert De Nobili*, (Rupert Hart-Davis- London) 1959; Ross, A., *A vision betrayed : the Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742*, ( Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh), 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Amaladoss, M., “Robert de Nobili,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, p.498.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

De Nobili was the first European to learn the language of the Hindu scriptures.<sup>23</sup> The idea was to study the Vedas and to use Indian philosophical languages as a vehicle for introducing the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> He also wanted to train native people educated according to Indian traditions because he was convinced that “having preserved their Indian customs and their castes, [Indian Christian leaders] would be respected by their countrymen, to whom they could speak on equal terms.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore he wanted to start a Brahmin seminary with a five year course in Christian Philosophy. Cronin comments that:

He [De Nobili] wanted his future priests to present Christianity to the Indian people in their own languages, not in jargon in which all religious terms were Portuguese; to be well trained in Christian theology but also experts in the religion of the Hindus around him; to depend for support and protection on their own countrymen, not on foreigners.<sup>26</sup>

When Europeans were building Church architecture based on European styles, De Nobili began to construct Churches following Indian customs. He had no difficulty in encouraging upper caste converts to maintain their socio-religious customs such as *Kutumi*, the special hair tuft of the Brahmins, and the *Yajnopavita*, the sacred thread of the twice-born. However, this special thread was blessed with Christian prayers.<sup>27</sup> These converts organized their own Church, but like the Syrian Christians, they did not associate with low-caste converts.

De Nobili's achievement is to be seen in his understanding and adaptation of Hindu customs and religion. However, as Boyd highlights:

De Nobili's Sanskrit and Tamil works, interesting as they are as experiments in coining new words and phrases to replace the Latin

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Cronin, V., op.cit. pp.72-92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.168.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp.104-115.



theological vocabulary, ... make no real attempt to use Hindu terminology and thought-forms to express the Christian faith.<sup>28</sup>

De Nobili's main objective was to make Christianity look less objectionable in external forms.<sup>29</sup> He had no interest in re-interpreting theology of his time in light of Hindu culture or philosophy. In matters of doctrine De Nobili was conservative; he rejected Hindu doctrines of Karma and rebirth,<sup>30</sup> and was unwavering in his adherence to Catholic doctrine.

De Nobili's cultural approach to Hinduism was suppressed by the Catholic Church and it took another one hundred years to restore the work that he started. This was through the missionary work of Joseph Constantius Beschi (1680-1747), an Italian Jesuit missionary, who arrived in India in 1710.<sup>31</sup> Very much like De Nobili, Beschi adopted the appropriate garb and style of a Sannyasi. Commenting on the theological work of Beschi, Michael Amaladoss writes: "Beschi is the most outstanding of the followers of Robert De Nobili in the tradition of creative inculturation."<sup>32</sup> He wrote a famous Tamil epic on the life of Joseph, *Thembavani (The Unfading Garland)*. In this epic story, through Joseph husband of Mary, Beschi narrates the whole story of salvation, as told by St. Michael to Joseph's family as they fled to Egypt.<sup>33</sup> In this publication, the Christian theological concepts were translated into the terminology of Hindu philosophical and religious conceptions. After the pioneering work started by Beschi there has been very little creative Christian theological reflection from within the Indian philosophical and

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<sup>28</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.14.

<sup>29</sup> Amaladoss, M., op.cit. 1998, p.498.

<sup>30</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.13.

<sup>31</sup> Amaladoss, M., "Joseph Constantius Beschi," *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, p.58.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Literary historians rank this story among the best epic in Tamil literature. Not only that, a statue of him in the marina of Madras honours his contribution to Tamil literature. His other works include two books of grammar: *Thonnul Vilakkam* in Tamil and *Clavis* in Latin and Tamil. He also compiled two dictionaries: the *caturagarathi* (fourfold dictionary) in Tamil. The Tamil- Latin dictionary contains 9,000 words. The Tale of the Guru Paramatha is a humorous story which is translated in multiple languages. For Further see L. Besse, *Father Beschi of the Society of Jesus: His times and His writings* (1918); Antonio Sorrentino, *l'altra perla dell'India* (EMI: Bologna) 1980.



religious context. Discovering this barren state of Indian Christian theological reflection, Boyd laments that

After the work of these missionary pioneers the effort to use the language and ideas of the Vedas and the Vedanta as a direct means for conveying and expounding Christian doctrine was not seriously undertaken again by Christian theological writers until the time of the Christian *bhakti* poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.3 Protestant Missionary Tradition

The first Protestant missionary to arrive in India was Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg (1682-1719) in 1706.<sup>35</sup> Ziegenbalg's approach to other religions evolved during his missionary activities in India. He started his missionary enterprise with the negative prejudices and assumptions of European Christians of his time on Hinduism. In his dialogue with Brahmins, Ziegenbalg used terms such as 'you heathens,' 'the bondage of idolatry,' and 'gross ignorance.'<sup>36</sup> However, his attitude changed after his study of Hindu scriptures. In his unprinted *Remarkable Voyage*, in 1710, he wrote: "I do not reject everything they teach, rather rejoice, that for the heathen long ago a small light of the gospel began to shine."<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, people such as A.H. Francke (1663-1727) continued to exhibit the general negative attitude of the Western Christian missions. He believed that "the missionaries were sent out to exterminate heathenism in India, not to spread heathen nonsense all over Europe."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.14.

<sup>35</sup> Gensichen, H. W., "Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg," *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, pp.761-762.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, R., op.cit. 1975, p.14; Also see, Hudson, D. D., *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Michigan), 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

### 1.3.1 Alexander Duff (1806-1878)

By nineteenth century when Protestant mission work was already well established in India, there was little rethinking of the Christian theological approach to other religions. Shortly after his arrival in Calcutta in 1830, Alexander Duff started to develop higher education.<sup>39</sup> His hope was that “secular education in English would prove an effective *praeparatio evangelica* by undermining the religious structure of Hinduism in the light of modern knowledge.” The western educational system, Duff believed, would ‘destroy’ Hinduism and from its ruins construct a Christian edifice.

This approach to Hinduism is well illustrated in Duff’s *India and Indian Missions*.<sup>40</sup> Here he argued that Hinduism under the influence of Christianity will dissolve itself. As I. D. Maxwell observes, Duff viewed Hinduism as “a gigantic system,” and as “a grand theory” which “explains his unshakeable confidence that under the pressure of western knowledge there would be a rapid and total dissolution of Hinduism.”<sup>41</sup> Duff shared this understanding of Hinduism as a comprehensive “system” of the Orientalist scholars in Europe.<sup>42</sup> He ignored the various regional variations and argued that Hinduism was to be evaluated and judged as a system by the rationally superior standards of western civilization which the missionaries should advance: “reason and judgement, discretion and forethought, so employed, are the very instruments which Jehovah has been pleased to select...”<sup>43</sup> With these tools, the missionary has the duty and privilege of “spiritual invasion, and ultimate possession, of such a country as India.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Walls, A. F., “Alexander Duff,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, pp.187-188.

<sup>40</sup> Duff, A., *Indian and India Missions Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, both in Theory and Practice*, (J. Johnstone: Edinburgh) 1840.

<sup>41</sup> Maxwell, I. D., *Alexander Duff and the Theological and Philosophical Background to the General Assembly’s Mission in Calcutta to 1840* (A thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy: The University of Edinburgh) Feb.1995. p.206.

<sup>42</sup> Oddie, Geoffrey A., “Constructing “Hinduism”: The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding,” *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed), (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Cambridge) 2003, p.158.

<sup>43</sup> Duff, A. op. cit. 50, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Duff approached Hinduism as a theological system, endeavoring to outline “the grand theory of Hinduism.”<sup>45</sup> His portrayal of Hinduism is of a “decadent” and “false religion,” void of anything good or valuable. He explained this in terms of the “demoralization which has become endemic and universal” that has been written into the Indian character, due to a “potent antecedent cause...a false religion.”<sup>46</sup> Even though Duff does not say what these demoralizing characters are, one can conclude that it was the conditions under which the people of India were living. In other words, Indian people’s physical and psychological make-up, habits and social, economic and political relations were due to her religious faith.

Duff traced the decadent moral state of Hinduism to the interpretation of the First principle, the *Brahman*, which is the “one great universal self-existing Spirit” and is “absolutely without qualities or attributes.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, any homage, devotion or worship is impossible.<sup>48</sup> He described the four schools of contemporary Hinduism as ‘spiritual pantheism’, ‘spiritual idealism’, ‘spiritual materialism’, and ‘popular mythology’<sup>49</sup> and gave an account of Hindu cosmology.<sup>50</sup> This whole system for Duff “generate[s] and perpetuate[s] nationally an intellectual imbecility and childhood which can only be regaled by the marvellous and the monstrous.”<sup>51</sup> The only antidote for this mythology is its substitution by “the true Infinite,- in Christianity - and that is, the triune Jehovah.”<sup>52</sup>

Having shown the inadequacy of Hinduism Duff proposes a method for improvement. He had little faith in the economic or political progress as a viable alternative to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.vi.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.40.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp.54-55.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.60.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp.110-112.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.117.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.120.

improving the conditions of the people. Regarding political progress, he opined that the people of Eastern India did not have “the true sentiment of rational freedom.”<sup>53</sup> The economic growth and education alone would not solve the problem of India.<sup>54</sup> The answer lay in religion, and the core of the mission was to import the Gospel in the form of Protestant Christianity. He saw this as “the only effectual Liberator, Intellectualizer, Civilizer and comforter of man!”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, only this “mighty system of Revelation” would overturn Hinduism just as Roman Catholicism had been overturned in sixteenth century Europe. The concept of atonement in particular, Duff believed, would overturn the tenets of Hinduism.<sup>56</sup>

Duff offered three ‘generic modes’<sup>57</sup> for transforming the Indian people: preaching of the gospel; elementary education; and Bible translation.<sup>58</sup> It was his belief that after the elementary education and seminary training “a few...exert a patent influence over the many.”<sup>59</sup> Duff felt that there could be no progress “apart from an enlightened Christian education.”<sup>60</sup> Christianity, therefore, was a necessary condition for the re-building and civilization of India. Moreover, Christian conversion would improve the social as well as the spiritual condition of Indians.

The task of education would be in the hands of a western missionary elite,<sup>61</sup> and it was their responsibility to preach the gospel and translate the Bible, that in turn “would bring progress and reform to India for the purpose of the intellectual, moral and spiritual regeneration of the universal mind.”<sup>62</sup> However, he felt that the spread of the gospel had

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.262.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.264.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.279.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp.273-274.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.285.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.386.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.301.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.335.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.307.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 284.

to be in the hands of the native people. Thus he wanted to reform the elite in such a way that it is “so naturalised...that it can flourish and perpetuate itself, independent of foreign aid...working out for itself the means of self-support and self propagation ...the only valid test of real permanent success!”<sup>63</sup> This self-sustaining indigenous system, Duff was convinced, would continue to be revolutionary even after European aid and missionaries were withdrawn.<sup>64</sup> This was equipping the native people to communicate the gospel. Duff had unlimited confidence that his mission method would serve as an instrument of conversion.

The civilizational superiority that Duff attributed to western Christianity was widely accepted among the British imperialists. Industrialised Britain was considered culturally more civilised than India - which was seen as “barbarous and superstitious”. The country could be saved, they argued, only through “complete reformation.” Even John Stuart Mill pointed out that “the barbaric, sub-human beings in India could be brought to the level of human beings only through ‘parental despotism’ and training in western knowledge.”<sup>65</sup>

In summary, Duff contributed entirely in a negative way in systemizing Hinduism as “one” thing. The Gospel remains exclusive despite an acceptance of the social structure of Hinduism. The intention through cultural accommodation was not to evaluate Hinduism positively but for the Gospel to demolish it.

### 1.3.2 John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929)

John Nicol Farquhar, Congregational missionary in India at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pioneered a new approach to the Christian understanding of Hinduism, notably in his *Crown of Hinduism* (1913) and subsequent publications.<sup>66</sup> Farquhar marks a radical

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.300.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.307.

<sup>65</sup> Dharmaraj, J. S., “A Brief Review of Alexander Duff, English Education and Colonial Connections in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India” in *Indian Church History Review* Vol.25, Nu.2 Dec.1991, p.81.

<sup>66</sup> Sharpe, E. J., “John Nicol Farquhar,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, Anderson G. H. (ed.), (Simon & Schuster Macmillan: London), 1998, p.208.

shift from the traditional missionary approach of his day, as instanced in the previous section by Duff's negative view of Hinduism.

Farquhar was critical of the traditional approach of his day, seeing it as a stumbling block to effective mission work in India. A 'new' missionary approach was needed for the advancement of the Gospel, and he articulated in term of what has come to be known as the 'fulfillment theory.' Eric Sharpe suggests that Farquhar's understanding of fulfillment was not always well understood either by Hindus or by other Christians. For many conservative Christian missionaries, Farquhar, by introducing the evolutionary theory "had virtually sold his soul to the devil." Liberal Christians and Hindus, on the other hand, concluded that his "insistence upon the supremacy of Jesus Christ in the world religions was condescending."<sup>67</sup>

Farquhar's theoretical knowledge of Hinduism, which he acquired at Oxford, and the empirical evidence that he gathered in India, demonstrated that "the traditional view did not do 'justice' to the emerging facts of the religious history" of India. This did not mean that Farquhar embraced everything in Hinduism. In an article in 1901, he categorically states: "we want a criticism that will set Christianity clearly and distinctively in its relations with other faiths."<sup>68</sup> But he recognized early on that criticism of Hinduism is only of limited 'value' in the propagation of the gospel; missionary criticism had, in his view, "seldom been scientific enough to be of permanent value."<sup>69</sup> In other words, he wanted to escape from generalization of Hinduism and deal with concrete evidence. This was a challenge to the missionaries to study Hinduism rather than taking it for granted, and to test their understanding of Hinduism against the real experience of Hindu believers.

In this respect Farquhar was an early champion of comparative study of religions. Yet he insisted that the goal of the missionary is not just study of religions but the

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<sup>67</sup> Sharpe, E. J, "The Legacy of J. N. Farquhar," in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 3 No.2, 1979, p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.62.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

proclamation of the gospel on the basis of sound scientific understanding of Hinduism. So, scholarly accuracy and genuine sympathy are for Farquhar the two preconditions of effective evangelism.<sup>70</sup>

Eric Sharpe observes that this idea of fulfillment of Christ in other religions was already taking shape in Farquhar's mind during the days of his YMCA and reached its fullest expression in *The Crown of Hinduism*.<sup>71</sup> Farquhar's primary argument can be traced to an article published in 1910 in which he comments on Matthew 5:17:

Christ's own declaration, "I came not to destroy but to fulfil", has cleared up for us completely all our difficulties with regard to the Old Testament... We recognize the whole history to be a religious evolution which finds its perfect consummation in the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus Christ... Can it be that Christ Himself was thinking of pagan faiths as well as Judaism, when he said, "I came not to destroy, but to fulfil?" ... If Christ is able to satisfy all the religious needs of the human heart, then all the elements of pagan religions, since they spring from these needs, will be found reproduced in perfect form, completely fulfilled, consummated in Christ.<sup>72</sup>

According to Farquhar there is an evolutionary relationship between Hinduism and Christianity which he expressed in terms of Hindu progress from a 'lower' to a 'higher' state. This would, he argued, be achieved through a process of internal reform as Hinduism was influenced by its encounter with Christianity, and he insisted that Christianity would ultimately replace Hinduism: "Hinduism must die into Christianity, in order that the best her philosophers, saints and ascetics have longed and prayed for may live."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Farquhar, J.N., *The Crown of Hinduism*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 1913.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Sharpe, E. J., *Not to Destroy But to Fulfil*, (Gleerup, Swedish Institute of Missionary Research: Uppasala), 1965, pp. 311- 312.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.360



What this shows is that, while Farquhar may have been more understanding of Hinduism than his contemporary missionaries, he never regarded Hinduism and Christianity as religiously equal, and held firm to a belief in the ultimate superiority of the Gospel.<sup>74</sup>

Even though Farquhar was not present at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, he was a correspondent and his influence is evident in *the Report of Commission IV: Missionary Message in Relation to non-Christian Religions*<sup>75</sup> which William Gairdner acknowledges as “one of the most remarkable, perhaps the most remarkable, of a great series.”<sup>76</sup> The official conference report dedicated to the Christian message to the Hindu states: “the replies, one and all, lay emphasis upon the necessity that the missionary to Hindus should possess, and not merely assume, a sympathetic attitude towards India’s most ancient religions.”<sup>77</sup>

Farquhar’s correspondence highlights the harm that has already been done in the past by missionaries who failed to ‘study’ and be ‘sympathetic’ to the Indian religious tradition. It is interesting to note that the words ‘fulfil’ and “fulfillment” occurred frequently in the conference report,<sup>78</sup> where they applied both to the religious realm, and to social and political evolution. For example, in respect of caste, Farquhar wrote:

For the purpose of creating a living social order, a living religion is needed. It alone provides moral conceptions of strength and reach sufficient to lay hold of man’s conscience and intellect and to compel him to live in society in accordance with them....<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions: Report of Commission IV,” in *World Missionary Conference 1910: Reports*, Vol. IV, (Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier: Edinburgh), 1910.

<sup>76</sup> Gairdner, Temple, William, “*Edinburgh 1910*”: *an Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*, (Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier: Edinburgh), 1910, p.137.

<sup>77</sup> “Missionary Message in Relation to non-Christian Religions: The Report of Commission IV,” *World Missionary Conference 1910: Reports*, Vol. IV, (Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier: Edinburgh,) 1910, p.171.

<sup>78</sup> Sharpe, E. J., op.cit. 1965, p. 279.

<sup>79</sup> Farquhar, J.N., op.cit. p.191.



This “living religion” for Farquhar is Christianity and only Christianity which is revelatory can satisfy all the religious strivings:

But if all religions are human, and yet man can in the long run hold only Christianity, clearly, it must be, in some sense, the climax of the religious development of the world, the end and culmination of all religions. If all the religious instincts, which have created the other faiths, find ultimate satisfaction in Christianity, then Christianity stands in a very definite relation to every other religion. It is the fulfillment and crown of each; and it is our privilege and duty to trace the lines of connection and lead the peoples up to the Christ.<sup>80</sup>

The second protestant model by Farquhar demonstrated that his approach to Hinduism was more nuanced than Duff. More trained for comparative religion, Farquhar, was more selective of elements within Hinduism and wanted to transform Hinduism by seeing certain elements as being fulfilled in the Gospels. However, the Protestant tradition while offering two approaches that are in tension with each other demonstrates a stumbling block in its pursuits of furthering the Christian message in the Indian soil.

#### 1.4 Critical theological appraisal of the early Christian engagement with religious pluralism

The examination in this chapter of the three avenues by which Christianity reached India – Syrian Christianity, pre-modern Roman Catholic missions, and modern Protestant missions has shown that there is no empirical evidence that the adventitious traditions demonstrated the desirability of “engaging and grappling” with Christian faith in Indian culture.

The Syrian Christian communities’ continuous instance on keeping the cultural status quo raised the question of equality in the Church. As Forrester remarks, “there was, as far as can be discovered, no attempt to produce a distinctively Christian legitimization of the caste system; but neither was there any attack on it based on Christian grounds.”<sup>81</sup> In

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Sharpe, E. J., op.cit. 1965, p.281.

<sup>81</sup> Forrester, D., op.cit. 1980, p.100.

this context, the Gospel did not transform the culture. Furthermore, what we can conclude is that by accommodating itself to the Hindu culture of caste and separating itself, the Syrian Christian community did not seriously engage with religious pluralism in a theological way.

De Nobili accepted the structure of Hindu culture in order to interpret the Gospel in its own language. In doing this, he took the Roman Catholic theology, dressed it in Hindu garb and expressed it in the Sanskrit and Tamil languages. Like the Syrian Christians, however, he accepted caste, and this invites the criticism of modern missiologists that his desire to communicate the Gospel, while embracing translation, did not critique or discard unacceptable socio-cultural elements of Hinduism.<sup>82</sup> While this is a valid criticism of De Nobili's interpretation of Christianity, theological critiques of his materials must be evaluated in the context of his time. Furthermore, it must be noted that the goal of De Nobili was to have the Church take on the character of its native land - in this context India.

Alexander Duff's assumption of the superiority of European cultural and political values was a hindrance for an adequate understanding of Hinduism. He treated Hinduism from a monolith and from an exclusivist position and saw no value in its "system." Methodologically, Farquhar's fulfilment approach is based on the evolution theory that recognizes hierarchy of religions that links with western civilisation and culminates in Christianity.

## Conclusion

The Pentecostal attitude towards people of other faiths has its legacy from the adventitious traditions. Drawing on these traditions to engage with religious pluralism is not very promising for Pentecostals to build on. As specifically shown here, by social and cultural accommodation to Indian culture; by seeking to interpret the Christian message in Hindu terms but not addressing the content of the doctrine; missionary

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<sup>82</sup> Raj, P. P., "Robert De Nobili: An Indigenous Foreigner," *Christianity is Indian: The emergence of an Indigenous Community*, Roger E. Hedlund (ed.), (ISPCK: Delhi) 2000, p.109.

attempts to transform one by confrontation another by transformation has not demonstrated any success. The analysis of this chapter has raised number of issues for Pentecostal reflection:

Syrian Christian social and cultural accommodation to Indian culture and theological seclusion within is a warning for Pentecostals that lack of theological engagement with social and cultural elements of Hinduism will isolate Pentecostals into a theological ghetto, which is far removed from engaging with Christian faith in the Indian culture.

Pre-modern Roman Catholic socio/ cultural accommodation to communicate Gospel through indigenous languages, while maintaining strict adherence to Catholic creed will continue to perpetuate the “foreign” nature of the Christian Message. In order for the contextualization of Pentecostalism to take place in India, they have to reflect from within Indian religious and philosophical terminologies to re-construct the Christian faith.

The lack of success by early modern Protestant confrontation and attempt to reform Hinduism through confrontation (Duff) and fulfillment (Farquhar) challenges Pentecostals to explore new theological perspectives in engaging with people of other faiths. In this process, the focus now shifts to examining the process in which the contextualization of Christianity in India has necessitated Indian converts to engage with Hindu tradition.

## Chapter Two

# Religious Plurality as a Context for doing Christian theology in South Asia

### Introduction

This chapter will examine the religious plurality of India as one of the principle contexts into which Indian Christian theologians have aspired to interpret the Christian message. The acceptance of this situation, it will be argued in this chapter, does not simply mean an acknowledgement that people of different faith communities need to live together. Rather, it is taken by Indian theologians as the context in which they are challenged to interpret the Christian message in engagement with India's many cultural, philosophical and religious expressions. As V. Chakkarai argues in *Jesus the Avatar*, "the long stream of prophetic consciousness from the days of Rig Veda" and "the religious genius of India must form the background of Indian Christianity."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the focus of attention in the present chapter is on the process by which indigenous Christian theology developed in India, engaging with religious plurality as an essential framework for a contextual theology.

It will be argued that Indian philosophical and religious traditions laid the foundations on which indigenous Indian Christian theology has been built. The neo-Hindu renaissance, in terms of *Vedanta* philosophy, and *Bhakti* mysticism, encouraged Indian Christians to see an opportunity for Christian contextualization. The chapter will begin with an investigation of the character of nineteenth century Hindu movements, contrasting traditional religious practice with the "neo-Hinduism" of the Hindu renaissance, the *Vedanta* tradition and the *Bhakti* tradition, and will show that it was through dynamic relationship with Hinduism that Indian Christian theologians interpreted their understanding of the Christian faith. The chapter will then examine the main themes that have emerged in Indian Christian theological engagement with religious pluralism. The principle theologians who will be considered in this chapter are Banerjea and his approach to reading Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Chakkarai, V., *Jesus the Avatar*, (Christian Literature Society: Madras) 1932, pp.1-2.

narratives in relation with the Vedic texts; Upadhyay and his use of the Vedanta tradition; Chakkarai and his critical use of Hindu terminology; Appasamy and his engagement with the Bhakti tradition; and M. M. Thomas as the earliest example of an Indian theologian who developed an indigenous liberation theology. By examining the thought of these Indian theologians, the chapter will offer an overview of early approaches to indigenizing Christian faith in the context of modern Hinduism and Indian culture, and developing an “authentic” Indian expression of Christian faith.

## 2 Foundations for Indian Christian theological reflection

### 2.1 Neo-Hinduism

D.S. Sarma divides the Hindu Renaissance or Neo- Hinduism into two phases: the age of reform movements (1750-1885), and the age of the renaissance (1885-1950).<sup>2</sup> It was an intellectual movement which, as Eric Sharpe observes, flourished among the educated elite who had “come under direct or indirect Christian influence.”<sup>3</sup> Agreeing with this Clarke, an associate professor of theology at the United Theological College, Bangalore, elaborates three reasons to explain its rise. First, it was a response of Hindu intellectuals to the early Christian missionaries’ attack on Hinduism in their zeal to prove the moral superiority of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> It became the stock-in-trade of foreign missionaries to criticize the social influence of Hinduism on Indian society, and to attribute this to what they perceived to be the corrupting nature of Hindu religious beliefs and practices themselves. In the new mission schools and colleges, the syllabus presented Hinduism as a thing of the past, and Christianity as the only ‘true’ religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sarma, D. S., *Hinduism Through the Ages*, (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Bombay), 1973, p.59.

<sup>3</sup> Sharpe, E. J., “Neo-Hindu images of Christianity” in Arvind Sharma (ed.) *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity*, (E. J. Brill: New York), 1988, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, S., “The Jesus of Nineteenth Century Indian Christian Theology,” *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol.5, No. 1, 1999, p.32.

<sup>5</sup> Shourie, A., *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas*, (Harper Collins: New Delhi), 1997; Studdert- Kennedy, G., *Providence and the Raj: Imperial Mission and Missionary Imperialism*, (Sage Publications: New Delhi), 1998.

In addition to the impact of missionary education, Clarke identifies a second intellectual influence that stimulated the rise of Neo-Hinduism. “Orientalism” – the Western study of oriental religions and society – evolved a mechanism of knowledge that created the eastern world as the Other in relation to the western Self.<sup>6</sup> This was the epistemological base of the secular learning that was introduced in government colleges, which according to Clarke “broke the intellectual Indian mind and brought it into contact with Western science, literature and history.”<sup>7</sup>

This combination of missionary and secular assault on traditional Hinduism stimulated a process of intellectual enlightenment among many Hindu intellectuals, leading them to develop a critical reinterpretation of their own traditions.<sup>8</sup> As a result, many Hindu reformers emerged to “defend” and “purify” Hinduism; “by denouncing some of its later accretions, [they] separated its essentials from its non-essentials, [and] confirmed its ancient truths by their own experience....” In light of this new knowledge, Sarma remarks:

Many an evil custom in Hindu society, hitherto regarded as a decree of God, appeared in its true colours as the folly of man. Sati, infanticide, enforced widowhood, child marriages, untouchability, purdah, devadasi, the caste system and prohibition of foreign travel began to lose their tyrannical hold on the minds of Hindus.<sup>9</sup>

This was the intellectual and social background from which, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the *Brahmo Samaj* emerged as the most influential socio-religious expression of Neo-Hindu reform, under the initial inspiration and leadership of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833). For the purpose of this chapter, Ram Mohan Roy will be examined as the representative of the nineteenth century Neo- Hindu movement.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clarke, S., op. cit. p.32. Also see, Breckenridge, C. & Van der Veer, P. (eds.), *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*, (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia), 1993; Loomba, A., & Kaul, S. (eds.), *On India: Writing History, Culture, Post-colonial*, (The Oxford Literary Review: London), 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Sarma, D. S., op. cit. p.61.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, S., op. cit. p.32.

<sup>9</sup> Sarma, D. S., op. cit. p.61.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, this chapter will not deal with some of the renowned Hindu reformers such as Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884) and P. C. Moozumdar (1840-1905). See, Scott, C. D. (ed.), *Keshub Chunder Sen*, (CLS: Bangalore), 1979; Moozumdar, P. C., *The Oriental Christ*, (Boston), 1898.

In 1828 Roy established a society known as *Brahmo Sabha*, later to be renamed *Brahmo Samaj*, the aim of which was to “purify” Hinduism by rejecting idolatry, Brahman priests and their rituals<sup>11</sup> The central doctrine of this reform was that the Hindu scriptures, interpreted through *Advaita Vedanta*, propound an all-embracing monotheism, and lay out a way for the worship of “one” God.<sup>12</sup> It is on the basis of such Hindu monotheism, Roy argued, that traditional popular Hindu beliefs and practices should be eliminated, and a conversation begun with Christianity, no longer on the premise of Hinduism and Christianity being alien to each other, but as monotheistic allies that share common ethical principles. C. F. Andrews (1871-1940), a missionary and a theologian, correctly identified the Upanishads and New Testament as the two sources for Roy’s reforming work, on the basis of which he sought to bridge Upanishad’s thought with Christian moral teachings.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to emphasize that, in following this line of thought, Ram Mohan Roy remained a Hindu, his interest lying not in conversion from one religion to another, but in integrating Christian moral and ethical values into Hinduism.<sup>14</sup> In this regard he drew a clear distinction between Jesus as a moral teacher and Christian theology of Jesus as the Savior.<sup>15</sup> This is most evident in his book entitled *The Precepts of Jesus: the Guide to Peace and Happiness*.<sup>16</sup> He probed into important Christian doctrines such as the deity of Christ, atonement, miracles, and Holy Spirit, and challenged the contemporary Christian orthodoxy of his day. He assessed Christian teaching from the perspective of ethical renewal rather than intellectual modernism. For instance, he did not seek to rationalize the Gospel miracles, but nor was he interested in reconciling them with the myriad miracles of popular Hinduism. Hindus, he argued, would never be convinced by the New Testament miracles since

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, K. W., *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.31.

<sup>12</sup> Roy, M. R., trans. Killingley, D. H., *The Only True God: works on religion, selected and translated from Bengali and Sanskrit*, (Grevatt & Grevatt: Newcastle Upon Tyne) 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Andrews, C. F., *The renaissance in India*, (The Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland: Edinburgh,) 1912, p.111.

<sup>14</sup> Kolencherry, A., *Universality of Modern Hinduism* (Asia Trading Corporation: Bangalore) 1984, p.15.

<sup>15</sup> Sharpe, E. J., op. cit. p.7.

<sup>16</sup> Roy, R. M., *The Precepts of Jesus: the Guide to Peace and Happiness*, (Calcutta) 1820.



they were already familiar with their own miracle narratives in their religious scriptures. Rather, in order to reform this fabulous tradition of miracle stories, it was important to highlight the moral principles of Jesus' teaching that he regarded as the core of the Gospels.

Ram Mohan Roy was one of the first Hindus genuinely to study the Bible. Proficient in Hebrew and Greek, he read the Bible critically in its original languages, and privileged the moral teachings of Jesus Christ as his guide. Concurrently he read the Hindu scriptures, interpreting them by the same standard, finding in both his source of social reform.<sup>17</sup> Through the engagement with the Biblical and Hindu scriptures he critiqued various practices of Hindu traditions such as the performance of *sati*.<sup>18</sup> In 1818 he published a conversation between an advocate for, and an opponent of the practice of burning widows alive. He argued that *sati* is not found in the Hindu law and it is an example of degenerate Hinduism. He also rejected what he deemed the idolatry that was found in popular Hinduism, and as a Hindu theist argued for the return of Hinduism to its pristine monotheism. In support of this thesis he searched the Gospels for their universal value which he found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. It was these that he sought to make convincing to Hindu readers in his account of *The Precepts of Jesus* drawn from the four Gospels, with the intent of reforming their tradition in the interests of "peace" and "happiness".<sup>19</sup>

This reading of the New Testament met with sharp criticism from the Baptist missionaries of Serampore, who rejected his conclusions for three reasons.<sup>20</sup> They argued that the moral teachings of Jesus Christ cannot be treated independently from his divine nature of Savior of humankind. Secondly, they contended that the moral teaching alone, however meticulously observed, is insufficient for the attainment of forgiveness of sins, for human works cannot achieve what can only be given by divine grace. Thirdly, they argued that the observance of the moral teaching alone fails to give a human being sufficient strength to overcome passions and to follow

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<sup>17</sup>Kolencherry, A., op. cit. p.77.

<sup>18</sup> The rite of *sati* is the immolation of Hindu widows on their husband's funeral pyre.

<sup>19</sup> Samartha, S. J., *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ: Towards a Christology in India*, (CISRS: Bangalore), 1974, p.27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Jesus' commandments.<sup>21</sup> Roy defended himself against his critics by publishing his *Appeal to the Christian Public*,<sup>22</sup> in which he clarified his position. His reason for emphasizing the moral teachings of Jesus Christ rather than other aspects of the Gospel was due to his fear that dogmas and stories of miracles "would cause disputes and disunion among people."<sup>23</sup> More than this, however, he argued that moral teachings alone merit universal recognition, whereas doctrines are culturally specific and therefore culture bound.

The dispute between Roy and the Baptist Serampore missionaries found no resolution. But this did not lead him to lose his admiration for Christianity. The *Brahmo Samaj* continued to pioneer the path of Neo-Hindu reform, and it was left to his successors, especially Keshub Chandra Sen, to debate the issue of Christian doctrine.

## 2.2 *Advaita Vedanta* Tradition

If Neo-Hinduism gave priority to the ethical, the Advaita Vedanta tradition served as a philosophical and religious foundation for indigenous Christian theological reflection. *Advaita Vedanta* is a religious and philosophical tradition in Hinduism which, in its simplest form, can be defined as "unity and universality in the midst of diversities."<sup>24</sup> It represents a vision of unity that includes nature, humanity and God. One of the great philosophers of Vedantic Hinduism was Sankara (788-820).<sup>25</sup> Sankara's central philosophical category is monism. His search for truth begins with his quest to understand the impermanence of ordinary human experience in relation to the eternal unity of Reality. The misery of physical and emotional pain, he argued, is the result of perceiving the self as a separate individuation, whereas in

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<sup>21</sup> Kolencherry, A., op. cit. p.79.

<sup>22</sup> Roy, R.M., *An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of the Precepts of Jesus*, (Calcutta), 1820. He wrote two other books in his defence: *Second Appeal*, (1821) and *Final Appeal*, (1824).

<sup>23</sup> Kolencherry, A., op. cit. p.79.

<sup>24</sup> Aleaz, K.P., *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1996, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Sankara was born to a nambudari Brahmin family in the state of Kerala. See Tennent, C. T., *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The legacy of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay*, (ISPCK: New Delhi), 2000.

reality it is nothing but an emanation in human form of the Reality, perceived in the perspective of *Advaita*, or “non-dualism”.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimate reality is that which does not change in the past, present, or the future. Only the Absolute is “real”; everything in the universe is subject to change, and is therefore ultimately unreal. This includes the world, human souls, and even the belief in a personal God or *Isvara*. Furthermore, according to Sankara, Brahman is ultimately without attributes, or *Nirguna*. But if Brahman is void of all attributes and characteristics, how is Brahman accessible in the terms of human perception?<sup>27</sup> Brahman can only be defined as Reality, Knowledge and Infinity. Thus, Sankara’s commentary on the Brahmasutra states:

In the phrase ‘The absolute is Reality, Knowledge, Infinity’ it is the Absolute that is being defined, because the Absolute is being presented as the primary thing that one has to know. Therefore the reason why the words ‘Reality, Knowledge, Infinity’ are set in the same grammatical case as the word for the Absolute, and in apposition with it, is that they represent the characteristics by which it is to be defined.<sup>28</sup>

Reality is understood by Sankara as that which does not change in the past, present, or the future. Everything in the universe is subject to change or modification except for the Absolute that alone is “real.” All else is *maya*, or an appearance of reality. It is due to human ignorance of the Real that the universe is perceived as real. This illusion generates the idea that the entire visible external world, including the human individualized self and belief in the existence of a personal God or Brahman with personal qualities. In reality Brahman is *Nirguna*, i.e. without personal attributes. Were Brahman to be identified with creation, it would follow that creation would have to be viewed as unchanging and eternal, or Brahman risks being identified with diversity. On the other hand, if the Reality of Brahman is totally separate from the creation, there can be no reality in the universe of human experience and perception.

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<sup>26</sup> Wilson, J. G., “Sankara, Ramanuja, and the Function of Religious Language,” *Religious Studies*, Vol.6, 1970, p.58.

<sup>27</sup> Tennent, C.T., op. cit. pp. 123-126.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> In other words, the world cannot be an entity existing in itself. If the world is real, therefore, it is only as a manifestation “under certain conditions” of the one reality.<sup>30</sup>

The goal of *moksa*, or “release” from suffering, is to realize the true relationship of the soul to absolute Brahman. According to the Upanishads, humanity is trapped in the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) because of ignorance. In order to experience *moksa*, one must recognize the true nature of Reality and thus escape from the illusion that one’s self and the universe have an independent reality. This, for Sankara, is the enlightenment of true knowledge (*jnana*), specifically, the knowledge that identifies the soul with the Absolute Brahman.<sup>31</sup>

*Advaita Vedanta* thus provided a philosophical framework for the Indian Christian theological enterprise. But before we turn our attention to this quest, there is another tradition in Indian religious spirituality that merits discussion as a spiritual context for the indigenizing of Christian faith.

## 2.3 *Bhakti* Tradition

The *Bhakti* tradition expresses belief in Brahman in terms of love for, and devotion of a personal God. Rudolf Otto defines *Bhakti* as “faith in salvation through an eternal God and through a saving fellowship with him.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the *Bhakti* tradition provides a *marga*, or “path” toward *moksa* – “release” from the material world through a personally conceived Ultimate Being. The word *bhakti* derives from the Sanskrit root *bhaj* meaning “to worship”, “revere,” or “to be devoted to.”<sup>33</sup> Each of these meanings implies a strong reciprocal relationship between the devotee and God, in which the devotion and love of the devotee-s is returned by the grace and compassion of God.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp.131-141.

<sup>30</sup> Gregorios, P.M., “The Challenge of Hinduism: What can Christians Learn from It?” Kung, H., and Moltmann, J. (eds.), *Christianity among World Religions*, (T & T Clark: Edinburgh), 1986, p.44.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp.141-145.

<sup>32</sup> Otto, R., *Christianity and the Indian Religion of Grace*, (CLS: Madras) 1929, p.13.

<sup>33</sup> Dhavamony, M., *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta*, (Oxford), 1971, p.13.

One of the best expressions of *Bhakti* relationship between the devotee and God is found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.<sup>34</sup> Here the personal devotion of *Krishna* towards *Vishnu*, of whom he is an incarnation (*avatar*), is the central theme. *Krishna*'s devotion to *Vishnu* is a mode of relationship that exemplifies what is necessary and possible for every human being. It was on this basis that the *Vaisnava* reform movement in Tamil Nadu, interpreting the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* through devout *Bhakti* songs, contributed to an alternative tradition to that of *Advaita Vedanta*.

One of the chief architects of this movement was the twelve century Ramanuja (1017-1137), who gave philosophical elucidation to the doctrine of a personal God. He wrote extensive commentaries including *Vedanta Sutra*, *Sribhasya*, *Vedantadipa* and *Vedantasara*, and went on to build a system known as *Visistadvaita* or modified non-Dualism, arguing that Sankara's *Advaitic* interpretations of the *Vedanta* denied the reality of a personal fellowship with a personal God. Carman, who is an expert on the work of Ramanuja, points out six dimension of Ramanuja's understanding of a personal nature of God. Ramanuja's theological basis starts with the affirmation that God is supreme and transcendent and at the same time accessible to his devotees. God's divine attributes include sovereignty, lordship, wealth, grandeur, dignity, generosity, mercy, compassion, truth or abiding reality, knowledge or consciousness, joy or bliss, saintliness or purity, and infinity. It is possible, nonetheless, for God to be in contact with imperfect and sinful beings, without detriment to God's own perfection. Being the supreme creator, God embraces everything in the divine infinite being, and therefore has responsibility towards human beings as their Lord. As such, God is the merciful savior who rewards good and evil, and in these functions can be witnessed on the earth.<sup>35</sup> So to the question of "what must I do to be saved?" Boyd points out that Ramanuja rejects the *jnana marga*, or way of knowledge of the *Advaita* in favour of a personal relationship between God and human beings.<sup>36</sup> This understanding of a personal relationship between the devotee and God provided Indian Christian theologians with a second way of interpreting their understanding of Christian faith in the Hindu environment.

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<sup>34</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. p.110; See Gregorios, P. M., op. cit. pp. 42-43.

<sup>35</sup> Carmen, J. B., *The Theology of Ramanuja*, (Yale University Press: New Heaven), 1974. Also see, Devamani, B. S., *Religion of Ramanuja: A Christian Appraisal*, (CLS: Madras), 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. p.111.

## 2.4 Indian Christian engagement with Hindu thought

Sugirtharajah remarks that the Christian converts were not “passive consumers” of the western manufactured theology. Rather, they saw themselves as indigenous theologians’ intent on interpreting their Christian faith in light of the contextual realities.<sup>37</sup> The concern of this part of the chapter is to show how indigenous Indian Christian theologians approached the issue of religious pluralism from different thematic perspectives.

### 2.4.1 Krishna Banerjea (1813-1885)<sup>38</sup> - reading Biblical narratives in relation with the Vedic texts

As Ram Mohan Roy was influenced by Christian missionaries in his engagement with Christian thought as a basis of his the Neo- Hindu renaissance, he and his successors in the *Brahmo Samaj* influenced Indian Christian theologians. For example, Krishna Banerjea attempted to express the Christian faith by defending the very Christian doctrines that had been belittled by Mohan Roy in relation to the *Vedantic* tradition.<sup>39</sup> His writings fall into two phases. The theological standpoint of the first phase was influenced by the Scottish missionary theologian, Alexander Duff (1806-1878), whose exclusivist Christian theology opposed both orthodox Hinduism and the reformist thinking of *Brahmo Samaj*. This can be seen in his early

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<sup>37</sup> Sugirtharajah, R. S., *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Post-colonialism: contesting the interpretations*, (Orbis books: New York), 1998, p.4.

<sup>38</sup> Krishna Banerjea was born into an orthodox Brahmin family in May 1813 in Calcutta. In 1824 he attended the Hindu College and studied Sanskrit along with English. This period witnessed the beginnings of the Bengal cultural renaissance. In college, Banerjea came under the influence of professor Derozio, and joined the reformed party of agnostics and atheists that attacked all aspects of Hindu orthodoxy. He became the editor of their weekly journal *Enquirer*. During this time, he became acquainted with Alexander Duff. Duff was supportive of Banerjea’s quest to reform Hinduism but advised him to explore the truth of Christianity. As a result, Banerjea became a student of Duff in 1832, Banerjea converted and took baptism. Even though Banerjea was a member of the Presbyterian denomination, later he joined the Anglican Communion and from 1839 to 1851, Banerjea served as a pastor. In 1851, Banerjea was appointed professor of the Bishop’s College. It was here that Banerjea began to develop his theological scholarship. In 1868, Banerjea retired from the Bishop’s College but continued to produce works on Hinduism, but his theological view changed considerably. He shifted his attention from the refutation of Hinduism to the question whether Indian Christianity is in continuity with Hindu tradition. Banerjea was the first president of the Bengal Christian association organised to develop autonomy from Western missions. He died in May 1885.

<sup>39</sup> Clarke, S., op. cit. p.34.

publications where he wrote vehemently against Hinduism.<sup>40</sup> K. P. Aleaz, a noted Indian Christian theologian, states that Banerjea's goal in his early writing was to "expose the errors and weakness of Hindu philosophy and to set forth the Christian claims."<sup>41</sup> But after his retirement from teaching at Bishop's College, Calcutta, his writing evidences a different attitude toward Hinduism. Notably in his *The Arian Witness, two essays as supplement to the Arian Witness and the Relation between Christianity and Hinduism*,<sup>42</sup> he argued against the negative missionary perception of Hinduism, and developed a more positive way of construing the relationship between Christian and Hindu faith. He searched the Vedas and the Bible for a common witness to the divine mission of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

This new approach tried to prove that "Christianity was the logical continuation of Vedic Hinduism and that Indian Christians were the rightful heirs of the faith of the ancient Indian rishis."<sup>44</sup> Fulfillment was the central motif of his theology, according to which Christ is the fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of Hindu religion. He argued that while not all of the Vedic texts are fulfilled in Christ, selected narratives clearly prefigure the Gospel and are completed in its revelation. It was with this confidence that he stated:

If the authors of the Vedas could by any possibility now return to the world, they would at once recognize the Indian Christians, far more complacently [sic] as their own descendants, than any other body of educated natives.<sup>45</sup>

In the first section of *Arian Witness*, he attempted to demonstrate two things. Firstly he sought to establish a historical connection between the Hindu Brahmins and Biblical patriarchs. To this end, he investigated textual evidence to demonstrate that Media, the place of original Biblical Abraham, was the original 'seat of the Arians.'

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<sup>40</sup> See Banerjea, K.M., *Dialogues on Hindu Philosophy*, (CLS: Calcutta), 1861.

<sup>41</sup> Aleaz, K.P., "The Theological Writings of Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya Re-Examined" *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 28/1 April-June, 1979, p.77.

<sup>42</sup> Banerjea, K. M., *the Arian Witness: or the testimony of Arian scriptures in corroboration of Biblical history and the rudiments of Christian Doctrine*, (thacker, Spink & Co: Calcutta) 1875.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, S., op. cit. p.34.

<sup>44</sup> Banerjea, K.M., op. cit, 1875, p.10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.



Secondly he examined philological resemblances between Hebrew and Sanskrit, arguing that the word “Arian” has its roots in the Sanskrit language. The dispersion of the Arians occurred after the Turanian invasion, and as some went westward to Europe, others moved eastward to India.

In the second section of his book, Banerjea drew attention to the comparative study of narratives in Vedic texts and Biblical passages. He chose the common themes of the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood, juxtaposing the Vedic passages with those of the Bible. With reference to creation, he tried to demonstrate that both the Vedic writers and Moses, whom he took as the writer of the Pentateuchal creation narrative, “described the condition of our globe, before the existing arrangement was formed, very much in the same way.”<sup>46</sup> In the tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda*, Hymn 129, he found a parallel of the Biblical account of creation. But he also emphasized the originality of the Biblical insight by drawing attention to differences between the two scriptures. In the Vedic story, for example, there is no mention of God creating the world out of nothing. He therefore concluded:

The Mosiac idea of God as the original Creator of the Universe, without the assistance of any pre-existing materials, appears to have been unknown, or if it was suggested anywhere by report or tradition, to have been misunderstood, or in communities which had constructed systems of faith, laid on another foundation than the Word of God.<sup>47</sup>

The Vedas, Banerjea argued, have close parallels to the Old Testament, particularly in the theme of the *Prajapati* sacrifice, which he interpreted as a prefiguring of Christ.<sup>48</sup> “Christ is the true Prajapathi- the true Purusha begotten in the beginning before all worlds, and Himself both God and man.”<sup>49</sup>

In place of Farquhar’s fulfillment approach based on the evolution theory that recognizes hierarchy of religions that links with western civilization, however, Banerjea prefers to acknowledge Hinduism and Christianity as being part of a

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<sup>46</sup> Banerjea, K.M., op. cit., 1875, p.111-112.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> In the ancient Purusa mythology, Prajapathi is the instituted sacrifice and later became the link between the Impersonal absolute Brahman and the personal Brahman. See chapter Six.

<sup>49</sup> Philip, T.V., *Krishna Mohan Banerjee: Christian Apologist*, Confessing the Faith in India Series, no.15 (CISRS: Bangalore) 1982, p.196.

“family.” Thus, in later history, as Sugirtharajah remarks, Banerjea saw “the arrival of Christianity in India... as a family re-union of Vedic Hindus and Christian Brahmins.”<sup>50</sup> Banerjea’s goal was to demonstrate that the Indian religious texts were fulfilled in the Bible. One gets the impression that if something is genuinely Hindu, it is good and revelatory. In other words, the positive spiritual values in the Vedas spoke of the Christian message. In the concept of fulfillment, therefore, Banerjea found a bridge between the Vedic and Biblical scriptures.

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<sup>50</sup> Sugirtharajah, R.S., *The Bible and the Third World*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 2001: 92.



## 2.4.2 Brahmapandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907)<sup>51</sup> - *Advaita Vedanta* Tradition

Upadhyay is another Indian Christian theologian who was influenced by the Neo-Hindu renaissance. In contrast to Banerjea, however, he engaged thoroughly with Hindu philosophy, and pioneered the interpretation of Christianity through the medium of *Advaita Vedanta*.<sup>52</sup> It is in respect of this achievement that Aleaz refers to him as “the Father of Indian [Christian] theology”.<sup>53</sup>

As a young man Upadhyay was influenced by Neo-Hindu thinkers, especially Keshub Chandra Sen who succeeded Ram Mohan Roy as the leader of *Brahmo Samaj*. As Julius J. Lipner states, “it was also under Keshab [Chandra Sen] ... that Bhabani [Upadhyay] imbibed Brahmo doctrine and received the impetus that set him firmly on the path to whole-hearted commitment to Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Max Muller suggested that Upadhyay’s decision to embrace Christianity was the logical extension of the late nineteenth century *Brahmo Samaj*’s theological position<sup>55</sup> and following their lead he made an attempt to relate ‘pure Hinduism and pure Christianity.’ In this process, Upadhyay approached the issue of religious pluralism from the perspective of *Advaita Vedanta*.

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<sup>51</sup> Bhavan Charan Banerji was born in 1861 to a Bengali Brahman family. From childhood he was attracted to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This was solidified by the interaction with the Scottish general Assembly’s institution in Calcutta where Banerji studied. He was a disciple of Keshab Chandra Sen for a certain period. Banerji came to know Jesus Christ through Sen and through his uncle Rev. Kalicharan Banerji. In 1891 he received baptism from an anglican priest but in the same year became a Roman Catholic. In 1894 he became a sannyasi and adopted the new name Theophilus, which he translated as “Brahmapandhab” which means the friend of Brahman. His literary activities include the editing of *Sophia* (January 1894-March 1899), a monthly Catholic journal; *Sophia* (June 16, 1900-December 8, 1900); a weekly paper, and *the Twentieth Century* (Jan. 1901-Dec. 1901) a monthly magazine. His writing was highly criticised by Church authorities and almost stopped his theological writings in 1901. Upadhyaya then became fully engaged in the nationalist movement in Bengal. In November 1904 he brought out a Bengal daily called *Sandhya* (1904-1907) and in March 1907 a Bengali weekly called *Swaraj*. In September 1907 the British government on a charge of sedition arrested Upadhyaya and in October 1907 he died of complication from a hernia operation.

<sup>52</sup> Tennent, C. T., op. cit. p.7.

<sup>53</sup> Aleaz, K.P., op. cit., 1979, p.55.

<sup>54</sup> Lipner, J. & Gispert-Sauch, G., (eds), *The Writings of Brahmapandhab Upadhyay*, Volume One, (The United theological College: Bangalore), 1991, p.xix.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, M.M., *The Acknowledged Christ of Hindu Renaissance*, (CLS: Madras), 1970, p.100.

While others such as Nehemiah Goreh (1825-1895) attempted to systematically refute each of the Hindu philosophical systems,<sup>56</sup> Upadhyay took a positive attitude towards the Hindu philosophical systems, and it was within the framework of his knowledge of *Vedanta* that he studied Christian faith in relation to Hindu philosophical principles. The development of the Christian theology, according to Upadhyay, has not come to an end:

The Christian faith in the Indian soil is humid, and its humidity will make the ever-new Christian revelation put forth newer harmonies and newer beauties, revealing more clearly the inviolable integrity of the Universal faith deposited in the Church by the Apostles of Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup>

In his article entitled “Our Attitude Towards Hinduism”,<sup>58</sup> Upadhyay criticized the foreign Evangelical Christian missionary campaigns to label Hindu scriptures as “utterly corrupt” and “incapable of finding anything true and good...”:

Sectarian missionaries, for nearly half a century, since the commencement of their evangelical crusade, have been labouring under the delusion that the more it can be shown that the Hindu scriptures are so many lies, the more rapid will be the propagation of Christianity in India.<sup>59</sup>

Upadhyay described the missionaries as portraying Hindu scriptures in the “darkest color,” but argued that this had the opposite effect than that which they intended; they had the effect of presenting “Christianity as a destroyer and not a fulfiller and perfecter of what is true and good in the country.”<sup>60</sup>

As his alternative to this approach, he argued that that the *Vedas* and Sankara’s philosophy should be used as a starting point for interpreting the Christian faith in India, just as Thomas Aquinas had used Aristotelean philosophy as a tool to

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<sup>56</sup> Goreh, N., *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems*, (CLS: Madras), 1862.

<sup>57</sup> Upadhyay, B., “Hindu Philosophy and Christinity,” Julius Lipner & George Gispert-Sauch (eds), *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Volume One, (The United theological College: Bangalore), 1991, p.19.

<sup>58</sup> Upadhyay, B., op. cit., pp.4-6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

articulate Christian theology in the West.<sup>61</sup> He recognized that the task of engaging Hindu philosophy in the service of Christianity is “difficult and beset by many dangers”:

But we have a conviction and it is growing day by day, that the Catholic Church will find it hard to conquer India unless she makes Hindu philosophy hew wood and draw water for her.<sup>62</sup>

In this manner, therefore, Upadhyay affirmed his belief that the *Vedanta* serves as a bridge for the communication of the Christian message in indigenously Indian terms, more effectively than the missionary rejection of it:

If the Vedanta philosophy can explain the Christian religion in a better way by showing its co-ordination of parts more explicitly than the Graeco- Scholastic system, it is certainly desirable that Christianity should be re-stated in the terms of the Vedanta.<sup>63</sup>

Upadhyay recognized a universal goodness in all human beings, notwithstanding the fall. Quoting Romans 1:20 he regarded every human being as a theist, whether he/she recognized it or not. This theological starting point carried ethical implications. The Christian attitude towards Hinduism, he wrote, “[should be] that of an impartial friend who is anxious to find out what is true and good in his object of friendship and abjure what is false and evil.”<sup>64</sup>

Upadhyay’s understanding of the person of Christ is best expressed in one of his Sanskrit hymns called the *Hymn of the Incarnation*.

The transcendent Image of Brahman,  
Blossomed and mirrored in the full to overflowing  
Eternal Intelligence-  
Victory to God, The God-Man.

Child of the pure Virgin,  
Guide of the Universe, infinite in Being  
Yet beauteous with relations-

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<sup>61</sup> Upadhyay, B., op. cit, 1991, p.17-18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.35.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.6.

Victory to God, the God-Man.

Ornament of the Assembly  
Of saints and sages, Destroyer of fear, Chastiser  
Of the Spirit of Evil-  
Victory to God, the God-Man.

Dispeller of weakness  
Of soul and body, pouring out life for others,  
Whose deeds are holy-  
Victory to God, the God-Man.

Priest and Offerer  
Of his own soul in agony, whose life is Sacrifice,  
Destroyer of sin's poison-  
Victory to God, the God-Man.

Tender, beloved,  
Soother of the human heart, Ointment of the eyes,  
Vanquisher of fierce death-  
Victory to God, the God-Man.<sup>65</sup>

This hymn seeks to present orthodox Christian theology in the garment of Hindu terminology. Hwa Yung, an Asian theologian, makes the following comments on this hymn:

Here we see the language of India blended creatively and beautifully with those from Scriptural and Greek sources to powerfully present the Christian understanding of God to the Hindu mind.<sup>66</sup>

The hymn presents Jesus Christ as the image of the eternal Brahman. In God or Brahman the eternal word dwells. By identifying Brahman with God in this way, Upadhyay invites the criticism that he is evacuating the Biblical understanding of God in preference for the impersonal Hindu concept of Brahman without attributes. Yet he refused to use the Hindu term for the personal God, *Isvara*, on grounds that *Isvara* in the Hindu understanding is always less than Brahman.<sup>67</sup> For Upadhyay the

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<sup>65</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. pp.77-79.

<sup>66</sup> Yung, H., *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, (Regnum: Oxford), 1997, p.140.

<sup>67</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. p.72.

impersonal God (*nirguna Brahman*) is connected with the personal (*saguna Brahman*) and these two features are seen as complimentary rather than contradictory.

Upadhyay also posits that God is infinite, and the sustainer of the universe, and yet born of a Virgin. Though Jesus Christ is “infinite in being”, he is also “with relations”, and is thus personal and knowable.<sup>68</sup> Upadhyay never wavered in his conviction that Jesus is fully God and fully human. He saw Jesus Christ as “transcendent image of Brahman” while at the same time “child of the pure virgin.” For this he coined the word *Nara Hari* to express the two natures united in one Christ. Many Christians have challenged this expression because of the word *Hari* is used as a proper name for the god *Visnu*.<sup>69</sup>

Upadhyay rejects the use of the Hindu concept of *avatar* for Christ on grounds the “incarnation” of Hindu gods occurs only in the natural order, whereas Christ’s incarnation is “an incomprehensible mystery and is wholly a matter of faith.”<sup>70</sup> For Upadhyay there is, therefore, only one true incarnation and that is Jesus Christ.

In this respect his theological approach to Hinduism was to enter into a dialogue with indigenous philosophical tradition of Hinduism in order to re-interpret the Christian theology in India. Upadhyay differs from Banerjea in that he does not limit Hinduism as a “witness” to Christ. Hinduism therefore does not represent unfulfilled aspirations which find their fulfillment in Christianity. Rather Hinduism is the foundation in which Christianity is to be build.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pp.77-79.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Mattam, J., “Interpreting Christ to India Today: The Calcutta School,” *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 23/1-2 (January- June, 1974), p. 196.

### 2.4.3 Vengal Chakkarai (1880-1958)<sup>71</sup> - Critical use of Hindu terminology

Despite the efforts of theologians like Banerjea and Upadhyay, the Church in India at the turn of the twentieth century had a distinctively western characteristic, reflecting the impact of the missionaries during the previous hundred years. Western in structure and worship, many Indian Christians were repulsed by what they saw as a transposition of western theology with its theological formulae and liturgy. Some argued that the only solution to this problem was to set the church in India free from the control of the western churches and western political power, so that it could find its own identity as an Indian church. A group of young Indian Christians in Bangalore started a club called “The Young Liberals Club”, the purpose of which was to contextualize Christianity in India and draw Indian Christians into the freedom struggle for an India independent of the British *Raj*. Parallel with this development, a similar development in Madras saw the rise of “The Rethinking Group”, dedicated in the words of D. A. Thangasamy to “questioning doctrines and the need of the Church itself.”<sup>72</sup> V. C. Rajasekaran explains the group’s purpose thus:

....The ‘Rethinking Group’ through various means endeavored to give a new expression to Christian way of life and thought in India and to slowly transform the Indian Christians to think and act for themselves independently....<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> V. Chakkarai was born on 17 January, 1880 in Tamil Nadu. When Chakkarai was six years old, his father who was a banker died. Even though Chakkarai was brought up under the religious influence, as a high school student, the anti-religious rationalism made him an agnostic. But Swami Vivekananda influenced Chakkarai to view Hinduism as an integral part of the national awakening of India. At the Madras Christian College, Chakkarai came under the influence of Principal William Miller who believed that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Hinduism. Consequently, Chakkarai was baptised at the Madras Christian College chapel in 1903 and became a member of the Free Church of Scotland. After graduating with a degree in philosophy and taught in high schools in Madras for five years. During this period he attained his law degree and practiced law from 1908 to 1913. He left law practice and joined the staff of the Danish Mission in Madras. In 1917, Chakkarai joined the Home rule movement and in 1920 Gandhi’s Non-cooperation Campaign. His participation in the national politics led him into the Trade Union movement and became the Chairman of the All-India Trade Union Congress in 1951. He was also elected Mayor of Madras for one term in 1941 and became a member of the Legislative Council in 1954. Chakkarai was also a member of the *Re-thinking Christianity* group. He was one of the founders of the *Christo Samaj* and owned and edited the weekly paper *Christian Patriot* from 1917 to 1926. Chakkarai died in 1958.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Philip, T.V., “Chakkarai and the Indian Church,” Taylore, R.W. (ed.), *Society and Religion*, (CISRS: Bangalore), 1976, p.153.

<sup>73</sup> Rajasekaran, V. C., *Reflections on Indian Christian Theology*, (CLS: Madras) 1993, p.121.



The group consisted of laymen from various secular professions and pursuits,<sup>74</sup> whose basic premise was that the Indian Church should think and act for itself and make Christianity an indigenous movement. The theological task of the Indian church was not to translate or re-state western Christian doctrines, but to develop an Indian Christian theology “as a truly creative act in the Indian situation.”<sup>75</sup>

One of the prominent individuals among the Re-thinkers was V. Chakkarai who wanted to escape the captivity of Latin and Greek theology in favor of a critical usage of Hindu concepts and terminologies for an indigenous expression of Christian faith. On the basis of Hebrews 1:1 (“long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,..”), he went beyond other Indian theologians by explicitly naming India’s religious prophets as God’s witnesses:

God has spoken in diverse manners and at different seasons through His prophets and *rishis* to men, revealing to mankind His holy will and mind, line upon line, here a little and there a little... God has never left Himself without a witness at any time to interpret His mind to men. Thus as we gaze at India’s religious past, we discern the long stream of prophetic consciousness from the days of the *Rig Veda* down to *Kabir*, *Nanak*, *Chaitanya* and Keshab Chandra Sen. These were sent by God as witnesses of the light.”<sup>76</sup>

Drawing from his own experience, Chakkarai set out his appreciation of Hinduism as an Indian Christian in an article on “Christianity and Non-Christian Faiths”.

Hinduism, he opined, satisfies the needs of its adherents just as Paul and Cornelius were satisfied with their traditions before being confronted by Jesus Christ.<sup>77</sup> “The salvation of each, as understood by each, is by the grace of the Lord; the former by the grace of God without the historical Christ and the other by the grace of God in Christ.”<sup>78</sup> Along this line of argument he edged toward recognizing the possibility of

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<sup>74</sup> The Members of the Re-Thinking Group were V. Chakkarai, Justice P. Chenchiah, Eddy Asirvatham, G. V. Job, A.N. Sudarisanam, D. M. Devasahayam, and S. Jesudason.

<sup>75</sup> Philip, T. V., op.cit. p.153.

<sup>76</sup> Chakkarai, V., op. cit. pp.1-2.

<sup>77</sup> Chakkarai, V., “Christianity and Non-Christian Faiths,” in P. T. Thomas *The Theology of Chakkarai*, (CISRS: Bangalore), 1968, p.124-129.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.131.



salvation in other religious traditions. However, Chakkarai still believed in the need for Christian mission, though its primary goal was not to make people choose Christianity over Hinduism unless God calls an individual to change his or her religion, in which case the convert should nonetheless remain rooted in local culture: “when God calls, if the call is heard by man what moves him is not that his old country is bad but that he has to obey the heavenly invitation.”<sup>79</sup> The purpose of the church in mission is to communicate the Gospel to the people without coercion, leaving them the freedom to choose Christ without requiring them to adhere to a particular institutional form of Christianity.

Founding a group called *Christo Samaj*, Chakkarai began to propagate the Christian message among the educated Hindus of Madras City in an atmosphere of love and fellowship. Rather than attempting a synthesis of Christianity and Hinduism, he explored creative ways of thinking that might help fellow Indians to encounter Jesus Christ. In contrast to some of the theologians of the nineteenth century, for example Keshub Chandra Sen and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Chakkarai accepted the Hindu concept of *avatar* as a legitimate way of interpreting the Incarnation of Jesus, without there by reducing Jesus to one of many incarnations. He wrote a book on the subject, entitled *Jesus the Avatar*, in which he explored the Hindu idea of *avatar*<sup>80</sup> and linked

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, pp.126-127.

<sup>80</sup> The concept of avatar is a characteristic feature of Hindu religion. Most Hindu thinkers accept that Jesus is one of many periodic appearances of the divine reality (Brahman), an avatar on earth. In the Hindu conception of avatar, there is no claim of exclusiveness or a once for all appearance. Thus, the person and work of Jesus Christ are welcomed into the family of avatars. Jesus could be understood as one such avatar that has come from God to accomplish the same task in a different setting and culture. Therefore, there is little attempt to develop a uniqueness of the Jesus Christ event and does not necessitate for an exclusive decision or a commitment to Jesus Christ. The understanding of avatar as it is stated in the Bhagavad-Gita 1V: 5-8

The blessed Lord said:  
Many a birth have I passed through,  
And [many a birth] hast thou:  
I know them all,  
Thou knowest not.

Unborn am I, changeless is my Self;  
Of [all] contingent beings I am the Lord!  
Yet by my creative energy (maya) I consort  
With Nature- which is mine- and come to be [in time].

For whenever the law of righteousness (dharma)  
Withers away, and lawlessness (adharma)  
Raises its head  
Then do I generate Myself [on earth].

it with the Christian understanding of incarnation. While affirming Jesus in terms of *Avatar*, Chakkarai challenged the Hindu concept of plural *avatars* by insisting that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is permanent, dynamic and advancing. Jesus is thus Christ, the unique incarnation of God,<sup>81</sup> in whom there was the real descent of God. As *avatar*, Jesus Christ is therefore the revealer of God, God being fully present in Jesus as a historical person. But, with respect to the Hindu notion of repeated *avatars*, Chakkarai argued that the real incarnation of God in Jesus did not end on the

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For the protection of the good,  
For the destruction of evildoers,  
For the setting up of righteousness,  
I come into being, age after age.

We can make the following observations in order for the divine to incarnate into the world of time and space. First, the avatar passage starts with the affirmation of the unchangeable nature of the Divine. Secondly, the sovereignty of the Divine is proclaimed. Thirdly, the unchangeable enters human history or cosmos. Fourthly, the Divine enters into the cosmos of its own free will. Fifthly, the reason for the avatar is because of the decline of *Dharma* and the rise of evil. Sixth, the purpose of the avatar is to restore peace and justice.

The aim of avatar is to liberate humanity from re-birth. Furthermore in Hinduism, avatar is of a recurring nature. The avatar comes into the world from time to time, as need arises. The fundamental assumption of the concept of avatar is that at times of crisis the intervention of the deity in the form of humans or animals depending on the context will emerge as an avatar to maintain *dharma*.

In *Saivism* there are as many as twenty- eight avatars of *Siva* manifesting. However, at the nucleus of the concept of avatar there are four but later works records twenty- four or twenty- nine.<sup>80</sup> The avatar is not exclusive to the human form but also takes the form of animals. The first of four avatars are the fish, the tortoise, the boar, and the dwarf as the incarnation of Vishnu.

The two most significant avatars are Rama and Krishna. Most *Vaisnavas* sects believe in the reality of the avatars, their human birth, the divine and human nature and their death.<sup>80</sup> There is another avatar yet to come known as the *Kalkin*. This avatar will appear at the end of the present age to punish the wicked, reward the just and establish a new era symbolising the ultimate triumph of Brahma values.

Another feature is avatar temporally enters into human history and after the task is finished disappears and is reabsorbed in Godhead (Brahman). D'Sa asserts that an avatar occurs not for adoration or worship, "but to provide inspiration and courage in moments of hopelessness when evil replacing goodness acts supreme, and to remind the believer that the divine mystery remains always in control of this world and nothing happens without his consent or knowledge." Nonetheless, it must be recognized that avatar are worshipped and given adoration as a Divine entity. Temples are constructed for particular avatars that have acquired divine status. For example, Krishna is an avatar of the Divine and is worshipped as such. However, it must be recognized that an avatar is not a redeemer or a savior as in the Christian understanding. In avatar there is no sense of one avatar personally taking on himself/herself or as an animal the responsibility for humanity and saving it from sin. See, Brockington, J., *Hinduism and Christianity* (MacMillan; London), 1992; "Editorial: The Christological task in India," in *Religion and Society* by Richard W. Taylor ed. (CISRS: Bangalore), 1982; Zaehner, R.C., *Hindu Scriptures* (J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.: London), 1966; and X D'Sa, F., "Christian Incarnation and Hindu Avatars," in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?* (SCM Press: London), 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Chakkarai, V., "My Credo," Thomas, T. P., *the Theology of Chakkarai* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1968), p.44.

cross, but is repeated through incarnation of the Holy Spirit. This is also the real presence of God in Christ, as distinct from the Hindu mythic concept of *avatar*, but it is historical and continuing in its effect, as Jesus Christ reincarnates in the hearts of believers. “Jesus Christ is the incarnation or avatar of God; the Holy Spirit in human experience is the incarnation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>82</sup> As such it is permanent and continues to provide in-depth meaning. Thus, the Christian understanding of Incarnation, mediated through Hindu understandings of *avatar*, is that it does not cease with the crucifixion or ascension, but continues as God in Christ continues to be man, living and working in the lives of believers.

#### 2.4.4 A.J. Appasamy (1891-1975)<sup>83</sup> - *Bhakti* Tradition

Chakkarai’s immediate contemporary, A.P. Appasamy, developed another rich canvas of intellectual engagement with Hinduism, while pursuing a line that was very different from that of Chakkarai, and critical of his conclusions. A Bishop of the Church of South India, Appasamy developed a contextual theology based on the Indian religious heritage, particularly as found in the philosophy of Ramanuja, in whom he recognized the vision of one who “realize(ed) with clearness of insight and depth of conviction that God is an ocean of love.”<sup>84</sup> Ramanuja also believed that it is because of this love for humanity that God became incarnate in order “to satisfy the deep-rooted longing of the human soul for the vision of God.”<sup>85</sup>

In his article on “Christological reconstruction and Ramanuja’s Philosophy”, Appasamy started from a conservative theological position that gives the Word of God absolute authority for the doctrine of Christology. However, in interpreting the Word of God, he argued that every human being is influenced by his/her heredity and

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<sup>82</sup> Chakkarai, V., op. cit. 1932, p.121.

<sup>83</sup> Aiyadurai Jesudasan Appasamy was born on 3 September, 1891 in a Christian home. He spent from 1915 to 1922 abroad to study Christian theology. Appasamy’s doctoral dissertation from Oxford was on “The Mysticism of the Fourth Gospel in its relation to Hindu Bhakti Literature.” After his return to India, Appasamy served as the editor of the Christian Literature Society in Madras. 1930 he became an ordained pastor of the Church of India and taught theology at Bishop’s College from 1932 to 1936. He served on the Joint Committee on Church Union for eighteen years and on 27 September 1950 Appasamy was consecrated bishop. He died in May 1975.

<sup>84</sup> Appasamy, A. J., “Christological reconstruction and Ramanuja’s Philosophy,” in *The International Review of Mission*, Vol. XLI (162) April 1952, p.172.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.173.

environment. Therefore, an Indian Christian's interpretation of God's Word will be influenced by Indian background and training. Furthermore, he believed that people such as Ramanuja have appropriated something of the real revelation of God in their search for truth. In Ramanuja he saw one who "realized with great clarity and complete certainty that God is a personal being who loves us and to whose grace we should surrender ourselves willingly and gladly."<sup>86</sup>

Appasamy argued that there are three attitudes that Christians could have towards the philosophy of Ramanuja. The first attitude would be to polarize Christian thought and Ramanuja's philosophy to the point of their being mutually exclusive, with no possible connection between them. This might be argued on grounds of the Hindu doctrine of *karma* and practice of idolatry, both of which are alien to Christianity. While conceding some force to this argument, Appasamy nonetheless upheld that "his [Ramanuja's] philosophic teaching and his religious experience... contain some valuable elements which we should not ignore or lose."<sup>87</sup> The second attitude would be that Ramanuja's thought and experiences reveal some of the highest aspirations of the Indian devotees that the Christian could interpret in relation to Hebrews 1:1, as God speaking through the prophets (*rishis*) and devotees of India – the position that Chakkarai, as we have already seen, himself adopted.

Elaborating on this interpretation, Appasamy held that if God has revealed Himself to all people in all nations, then it is legitimate to acknowledge "many longings in the Indian heart which have been planted there by God."<sup>88</sup> This led him to his third Christian approach to Ramanuja, that argued that God actually meets the desires of Indian *bhaktas*, or devotees of His all-embracing love, and that Christians need to incorporate *Bhakti* experience in their exposition of Christian theology in India: "In Ramanuja we not only see some of the deep-rooted desires of the Indian soul, but also discover ways in which the all-loving God, in his abundant goodness and grace, has met and fulfilled these longings."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p.171.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p.172.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

The other point that Appasamy stressed in the philosophy of Ramanuja is that God is not transcendent, and “removed reality,” but is “the inner ruler.” Divine relationship with creation “is a continuous and intimate relationship of immanence.”<sup>90</sup> Taking these principles from Ramanuja, Appasamy expressed a Christian theology in spiritual ethical terms that engaged the *bhakti* tradition. God is “the ocean of love,” and forgives the sins of all who come to Him. Since all human beings are part of the fallen humanity, human longing for God cannot be realized until sin is removed and humans are reconciled to Him. Furthermore, by God dwelling within human beings, the divine-human relationship is restored, and “it is a source of endless of joy for us to seek His company during all the hours of the day and in all the manifold activities of human life.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p.175.

#### 2.4.5 M. M. Thomas (1916-1996)<sup>92</sup> - primacy of religion as a category for secular discourse

A third great Indian Christian interpreter of Christian faith in the Indian context, belonging to the generation after Chakkarai and Appasamy, was M. M. Thomas who approached the issue of religious pluralism from the thematic perspective of liberation. He resolves the problem of the issue of religious pluralism not by engaging it but by recognizing the value of religion. As India's struggle toward national independence brought various religious and ethnic communities into a new collective identity, M. M. Thomas' theological concern was to identify how Indian Christianity could participate in the process.<sup>93</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, he relentlessly addressed "Christian participation in nation building", on the principle that the Gospel engages the world, not merely its religions as seemed to be emphasized in the approaches of Chakkarai and Appasamy. Thomas called on the Indian church to participate in building a secular and democratic India. As Wielenga observes:

The communal bloodshed between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during the traumatic partition in 1947 must have impressed on him the need for a secular state and for a common secular ethos to sustain such a state. And the problem of mass poverty convinced him and many others that modern science and technology were needed to increase productivity, while a socialist orientation should ensure that independent India would commit itself to social justice in the distribution of the fruits of economic development.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Madathiparampil Mammen Thomas was born in 1916 in Kerala. He was spiritually nurtured by the Mar Thoma Church. As a young man, he was in contact with neo- orthodoxy, Gandhism and Marxism. He was rejected both by his Church as a candidate for ordination because of his orientation towards Marxism and by the Communist party for membership because he was a Christian. Thomas served on the staff of the World's Student Christian Federation. His formal theological training was only for one year in 1953 at Union Theological Seminary, New York. His contribution to Christian theology was recognized by receiving the 1966 Luce Professorship at Union Theological Seminary, New York and honorary doctorates by Serampore, Leiden and Uppsala. Thomas was the associate director and later succeeded Devanandan as the director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. From 1968 to 1975 he was chairman of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. He died in 1996.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas, M. M., *The Christian Response to an Asian revolution*, (SCM Press: London), 1966.

<sup>94</sup> Wielenga, B., "Liberation Theology in Asia," *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Rowland, C., (ed.), (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 1999, p.50.



Thomas utilized the framework of “tradition and modernization” in his analysis of the Asian revolution.<sup>95</sup> He looked favorably upon secular nationalism as the revolutionary force that would change the stagnation of traditional Asia. It would awaken the people of Asia to a new sense of freedom and responsibility. Religious and cultural elements within Asia would also be affected by modernism. He envisioned a “common framework based on common humanity,” in which people of different religious traditions explore common grounds concerning humanity and the society in order to work together.<sup>96</sup>

Theology in this perspective must be contextual and grapple with humanity’s struggle in the midst of sociological, political and technological realities.<sup>97</sup> Boyd characterizes Thomas’ theology as ‘*the Way of Action*’ (*karma marga*).<sup>98</sup> However, Thomas did not believe that Christianity was the only way of action to the exclusion of other ideologies and religions. In affirming “the Kingdom of God... as the final consummation of all things in Jesus Christ or its partial realization here and now through Jesus Christ,” he argued that it could not be confined within the history of the Church or presented as a substitute.<sup>99</sup> In his seminal work *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*,<sup>100</sup> he showed how Hindu reformers were influenced by the Christian faith, and argued that they should therefore be accepted as contributing to the work of Christ.<sup>101</sup> Christ in this perspective is not only at work within the traditions of Hinduism, but is active in the historical situation of all the peoples of India.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas, M.M., “Criteria of a Living Theology,” *M. M. Thomas Reader*, Thomas, T.J., (Christava Sahitya Samithi: Tiruvalla), 2002, pp.60-62.

<sup>98</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. pp.311-330.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas, M.M., “Christ at work in Secular History,” *M. M. Thomas Reader*, Thomas, T.J., (Christava Sahitya Samithi: Tiruvalla), 2002, p.32.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, M.M., *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian renaissance*, (CLS: Madras), 1970.

<sup>101</sup> Boyd, R., op. cit. p.312.



## 2.5 Critical Appraisal of the theology of early Indian Christian theologians

This chapter has offered a summary of the main lines along which nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian Christian theologians have attempted to engage Indian cultural, religious and social realities as the medium through which Christian faith can be indigenized in Indian culture. In their attempt to develop an Indian Christian identity in engagement with Hinduism, the question needs to be raised as to whose Indian Christian identity was being developed? Common to all the initiatives we have examined, with the possible exception of M. M. Thomas, the engagement with Hindu philosophy and Hindu religion demonstrates a high caste perspective, whereas the social reality and world view of the majority of the Indian Christians were determined by their lower caste, or outcaste experience. This was largely neglected by the theologians with the result that their theological orientations were at variance with most of the Indian Christians on whose behalf they presumed to speak. Again with the exception of M. M. Thomas, their theologies seemed to accept the status quo of Indian society. In certain cases this was explicit; Banerjea, for example, assured Caste Hindus that “no social change in habit or life” would be required from Indian Christian converts.<sup>102</sup> There was no systematic call for Christian converts in Indian society to transform the culture in light of the Gospel. In this respect Clarke poignantly asks,

Was [it] the caste and class bias of status quo conscious Brahmin/Hindu-Christians that refused to recognize the most obvious socioeconomic markers of the human Jesus? Was the human identity of Jesus that is conscripted through his socioeconomic locatedness an embarrassment to these Hindu-Christian theologians? Were they attempting to pass off Jesus as a pure- caste who was the ideal of their Brahmin seers and sages?<sup>103</sup>

Within the argument of this chapter Clarke’s question could be put another way: did the nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian Christian theologians opt for a contextualization that threatened to deliver Indian Christianity into the theological

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<sup>102</sup> Clarke, S., op. cit. p.41.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.40.

captivity of the Sanskrit Vedic tradition in the process of trying to free it from its erstwhile captivity to western theology?

A relevant issue that needs to be raised here is the concern that in engaging with religious pluralism these theologians deal only with Hindu tradition(s), and ignore other religions in India, notably Islam and popular religion. This also was a political choice. In seeking to present Indian Christians as “patriots among patriots”, these first generations of Indian Christian theologians sought to accommodate Christianity to the Hindu majority, at the expense of a more comprehensive quantitative engagement with religious pluralism.

## Conclusion

The evidence examined in this chapter confirms the hypothesis that there is a diversity of approaches emerging in the Indian Christian engagement with religious pluralism. The Indian religious, philosophical and social world-view was a challenge as well as an opportunity for Indian Christian theologians to reinterpret Christianity in the context of Indian religious plurality. The presupposition that all the theologians reviewed in this chapter defended was that Christian faith should not be imported, but should be constructed within the Indian cultural and historical context.

Situated within the context for independence, these Indian theologians evidence the imperative of escaping hegemonic western missionary expressions of Christianity as examined in Chapter One, and therefore followed the trends set by the Neo- Hindu renaissance led by Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen and others. Neo- Hindus tried to separate Jesus from any doctrinal creed and found inspiration for their own reform whereas Indian Christians preserved the doctrinal element but at the challenge of re-expressing and re-constructing from within Indian philosophical and religious traditions.

Furthermore, the analysis of this chapter shows that indigenous Indian Christian theologians from 19<sup>th</sup> century Banerjea onwards have engaged Hindu philosophy, mysticism and social thought as the context of their Christian theologies. In this process, Indian Christian theologians have developed several methods of engaging Hindu traditions as resources for the contextualizing Christian theology, none of

them winning universal assent. They therefore reflect a further dimension of pluralism in Indian Christian theology.

Even though these Indian theologians came from diverse community backgrounds and different Christian ecclesiastical traditions, they shared in common the desire to develop a meaningful theoretical and theological expression of Christian faith in the context of Indian religious pluralism. What their successors have done with the promise of a contextual theology that engages the challenge of religious pluralism in India will be the concern of the remainder of this thesis.

**The Contemporary Christian Theological Engagement with  
Religious Pluralism in India**

## Introduction to Part Two

### The Contemporary Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism in India

#### Introduction

Part One of this thesis demonstrated that the adventitious traditions transported a theology that was developed in the West with its theological formula and liturgy facilitated the problematic dislocation of Christianity in the Indian soil. By contrast, it was also shown that a more promising approach began to emerge with Indian converts who started to engage with religious pluralism.

The aim of Part Two will be to examine the current discourses on religious pluralism in India with the goal of identifying theological issues Christian traditions present to Pentecostals in engaging with religious pluralism. In Part Two of this thesis, it will be argued that the contextualization of Christianity in India has necessitated contemporary Christian engagement with religious pluralism. In so doing, contemporary Indian Christian theologians have developed several methods, typologies of engaging with religious pluralism. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Part Two will argue, Indian Christian theologians engaged social, religious and philosophical thought as the context for their Christian theologies.

With the reference to the work of Samartha, it will be argued that God's Spirit is present and active outside the Church. In pluralist societies such as India, Samartha argued that where the gifts of the Spirit are identifiable, Christians should be open to the possibility that God's Spirit is influencing the life of those people. This form of interpretation, Samartha believes can have 'mutual fecundation' between religious traditions.

With reference to Samuel Rayan, it will be argued that, Rayan attempts to bridge the Second Vatican Council to the Indian context by regarding all religions as having the same goal in the sense that religions function as a force towards liberation. Rayan further challenges by asserting the mission of the Church is not to monopolize the

truth but to be in partnership with liberating agents and participate in God's kingdom in ending poverty and injustice.

With reference to Wesley Ariarajah, it will be argued that the religious experiences of people of other faiths are different experiences of the same reality. Ariarajah argues for a subjective uniqueness of Jesus Christ in that Christians declare Jesus to be unique while people of other faiths may not affirm this commitment. The Church is called to serve faithfully its mission while recognizing that it does not exhaust or monopolize the revelation of God.

While these three theologians have made substantial contributions to South Asian discussions of religious pluralism, it is recognized that each of them develops their theological framework from a particular context. It was in this sense that each developed a contextual theology of religious pluralism, and it was this that made it possible to raise issues from their theology for Pentecostalism in India. It is with these Indian Christian theologians and their theological paradigms in approaching the issue of contemporary religious pluralism that the chapters in Part Two of this thesis are concerned.

## Chapter Three

### Stanley Samartha (1921-2001): Pneumato-Centric Approach as a Framework for Engaging with Religious Pluralism

#### Introduction

One of the contemporary Indian Christian theological engagements with religious pluralism that this thesis will identify is the pneumato-centric approach. In this model, the Holy Spirit is seen as the saving action of God's Spirit with people of other faiths. The pneumato-centric approach stresses the economy of the Holy Spirit which knows no bounds of space or time. This Spirit is not only universally present but is active outside the Church. In this connection Dupuis asks the question, "could it not, in effect, be thought that, while Christians secure salvation through the economy of God's Son incarnate in Jesus Christ, others receive it through the immediate autonomous action of the Spirit of God?"<sup>1</sup> Paul Knitter suggests that in engaging with people of other faiths, Samartha's theology evolves toward a pneumato-centric theology of religions.<sup>2</sup> Samartha believed that a pneumato-centric approach provided "more theological space and greater spiritual freedom to grasp the outreach of God's revelation in the world."<sup>3</sup> Eeuwout Klootwijk who identifies the theological approach of Stanley Samartha as theocentric acknowledges that his work can also be identified as a "good" example of a pneumato-centric approach.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to see what Indian Pentecostals can learn from Samartha in engaging with people of other faiths. Therefore, this chapter is concerned with Samartha's theological framework, and his use of Pneumatology in relation to his Christian theology in the context of religious pluralism. It will be argued that for

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<sup>1</sup> Dupuis, J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1997, p.196.

<sup>2</sup> Knitter, P., "Stanley Samartha's *One Christ- Many Religions*- Plaudits and Problems," *Current Dialogue*, Vol.21, December 1991, p.28.

<sup>3</sup> Samartha, S., "Keynote Address: The Holy Spirit and the Revelation of God in Emerging India- 2000," Puthanangady, P., *Emerging India and the Word of God*, (NBCLC: Bangalore), 1991, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Klootwijk, E., *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the Work of Stanley J. Samartha*, (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V.: Zoetermeer), 1992, p.326.



Samartha, Pneumatology became a social framework for inter-religious dialogue. In developing his pneumato-centric model, Samartha argued that unlike the Christ-event, the economy of the Spirit “blows where it wills.” The Spirit was present in the past world history and is active in the present world, but the challenge is to discern where and how the Spirit is working in the lives of people of other faiths. The promise of the pneumato-centric model is that if the Spirit is at work in other religions then Christians can become partners with them in building a community. Therefore, this chapter will seek to explore this theme by first analyzing the development of Samartha’s theological context and what it means for the Holy Spirit to be active outside the Church. Then, Samartha’s views concerning five aspects of the relationship between pneumatology and engagement with religious pluralism will be examined: Christology, salvation, hermeneutics, inter-religious dialogue and mission.

### 3.1 Selective Review of Samartha’s Theological Writings

The writings of Samartha introduced in this section represent the core of his theology, which will be consulted in this chapter. In examining the work of Samartha, Eeuwout Klootwijk describes his approach to Christian theology of religions as one of “commitment and openness.” Samartha has published widely in India and abroad. He championed writing a contextual theology, particularly in developing a Christian approach to other religions and ideologies. The underlying question for him was:

Religious pluralism today is not just an academic issue to be discussed but a fact of experience to be acknowledged. Traditionally religions have been moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between people. Recognizing this, how can men and women, committed to different faiths, live together in multi-religious societies? In a world that is becoming a smaller and smaller neighborhood, what are the alternatives between shallow friendliness and intolerant fanaticism? What is the Christian obligation in the quest for human community in pluralist situation?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Samartha, s., “Religious Pluralism and the Quest for Human Community,” *No Man is Alien: Essays on the Unity of Mankind*, J. Robert Nelson (ed.) (E. J. Brill: Leiden), 1971, p.129.

Samartha was acutely aware of the problems of religious pluralism in the secular state of India. He was conscious of the fact that political parties manipulated religious feeling of the people for political gain while religious communities sought political influence out of collective insecurities. As a result, one would have expected Samartha to endorse privatization of religious practice. To the contrary, Samartha was against privatization of religious practice because he believed it was against the nature of the religious ethos. Instead, he proposed allocating space for religious communities to exist and practice their religious duties in a way that will “pool” all the values that undergird the life of the nation.<sup>6</sup> In a pluralist society, he believed there must be new ways of relating between different living faiths communities. In this quest for a new relationship, Samartha revisited Christian theology.

In Radhakrishnan, Samartha saw the vision of one who was able to bridge “the life of contemplation with a life of action.”<sup>7</sup> An *Introduction to Radhakrishnan* was the subject of his master’s thesis, and was later incorporated into his PhD thesis. In *Introduction to Radhakrishnan* Samartha was very critical of his thought. However, many of Samartha’s later writings appear very close to Radhakrishnan’s ideas. Kim shows these similarities in the rejection of exclusive faith claims, importance of Vedanta to Indian thought, the relativity of religions, that the teachings of each religion’s tradition points to but does not exhaust the Ultimate Mystery, and the view that the Spirit was free to work in persons of each community.<sup>8</sup>

Samartha’s *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*<sup>9</sup> which was based on a series of lectures delivered at United Theological College in 1963 is rooted on his conviction that Indian Christian participation in the nation building project can be successful only through engaging with the concept of *Advaita Vedanta* tradition.<sup>10</sup> Samartha’s main

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<sup>6</sup> Samartha, S. J., *One Christ- Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1991, p.53.

<sup>7</sup> Samartha, S. J., *Introduction to Radhakrishnan: the Man and His Thought*, (Association Press: New York), 1964, pp.19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, K., *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*, (ISPCK: New Delhi), 2003, p.20

<sup>9</sup> The German version, *Hindus voe dem Universalen Christus*, (Evangelisches Verlagswerk: Stuttgart), 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Samartha, S. J., *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, (CISRS: Bangalore), 1974, p.v.

concentration in this writing was on the study of selected Hindu thinkers who have been influenced by the teachings of Jesus Christ. He examined the writings of Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Radhakrishnan and saw them as part of the “unbaptised koinonia.”<sup>11</sup>

He went on to argue that the interpretation of the Christian message should not be “limited” to the Semitic or the western garb of Christianity. If Origen utilized Plato’s philosophy and Thomas Aquinas appropriated the philosophy of Aristotle, Samartha argued, Indian Christians “should not be hesitant” to use the philosophical systems of Sanakara to communicate Christ in India.<sup>12</sup> In this process, he attempted to interpret the meaning and work of Jesus Christ through the *Advaita Vedanta* tradition. Even though Samartha attempted to integrate the *Advaita Vedanta* thought, it was only to “bring about the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

As the Director of the WCC’s sub-unit on “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies,” Samartha actively participated in moving towards a positive relationship with people of other faiths. His book *Courage for Dialogue* in 1982 was a collection of the essays and articles Samartha had written during the years he worked with WCC.<sup>14</sup> After his career at WCC Samartha returned to India, and continued his contextual reflection on Christian theology more boldly than he did in Geneva.

Samartha’s *One Christ Many Religions- Toward a Revised Christology*, was an exploration of the Christ event not as a doctrine that needed to be upheld in the midst of religious pluralism but as a contextual issue in engaging with people of other faiths. This was Samartha’s second book on Christology and like the earlier one advocated *Advaita Vedanta* tradition as the most adequate for contextual Christology and went beyond to develop a “revised Christology.” In this approach there was a theological shift from an exclusive approach to that of “relational distinctiveness.”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.119.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.167.

<sup>13</sup> Aleaz, K. P., *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1996, p.78

<sup>14</sup> Samartha, S. J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical issues in Inter-Religious Relationships*, (WCC Publications: Geneva), 1981.

Samartha's theological writings on pneuato-centric approach are found in three of his articles. "The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures and Ideologies," was a seminal paper first delivered in 1971 at the Addis Ababa was in relation to dialogue with people of other faiths, but later that same year, at the fifth Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies, Samartha argued for the Holy Spirit present and active in other religious traditions.<sup>15</sup> Paul Knitter commented that Samartha planted a "time bomb" in the Christian theology of Religions by introducing the *filioque* clause in his Addis Ababa address in 1971, and in his 1974 Oxford lecture on "the Holy Spirit and people of other culture and ideologies."<sup>16</sup> The second article "the Holy Spirit and people of Other Faiths," was published in preparation for the WCC Assembly at Canberra in 1991.<sup>17</sup> The third article, "Keynote Address: The Holy Spirit and the Revelation of God in Emerging India- 2000"<sup>18</sup> extended his reflections beyond previous articles. These core theological works provides the framework in understanding Samartha's pneumato-centric engagement with religious pluralism.

This brief review of the writings of Stanley Samartha that are considered to have core relevance to the subject of this chapter characterizes an attempt to develop a Christian theology of religious pluralism. At the heart of his theological concern is dialogue with people of other faiths in that he challenges the exclusive approach to other religions and re-examines the relevance of the Christian faith in a pluralistic context. The inter-connected themes in this enterprise are that the mystery of God is not exhausted by the revelation of Christ which means that God is present and active outside the Church. As such the goal of a Christian is to be in dialogue with people of other faiths discerning the activity of the Spirit and working together to create a community.

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<sup>15</sup> Samartha, S., "The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures and Ideologies," Kirkpatrick, D. (ed.), *The Holy Spirit: Papers of the Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological Studies*, (Tidings: Nashville), 1974; Republished Samartha, S. J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical issues in Inter-Religious Relationships*, (WCC Publications: Geneva), 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Knitter, P., "Stanley Samartha's One Christ- Many Religions: Plaudits and Problems," *The Sathri Journal*, Vol. 1, 1993, p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Samartha, S., "The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths," Castro, E. (ed.) *To the Wind of God's Spirit: Reflections on the Canberra Theme*, (WCC Publications: Geneva), 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Samartha, S., "Keynote Address: The Holy Spirit and the Revelation of God in Emerging India- 2000," Puthanangady, P., *Emerging India and the Word of God*, (NBCLC: Bangalore), 1991.

### 3.2 The influence of George Khodr of Lebanon

The heart of Samartha's understanding of the function of the Holy Spirit was that the Spirit of God cannot be limited to the Church or to the individual believer but that the Spirit is present and active in the world. Mozoomdar was one of the early Indian Christian thinkers who believed that Holy Spirit is at work everywhere. In *the Spirit of God* he argued that different religious traditions have developed under "the action and influence of the Spirit of God."<sup>19</sup> In his understanding, there are "common instincts, common truths, and common processes" found in all religions. These observation led Mozoomdar to make the inductive conclusion that there is a common resource. This common resource, Mozoomdar said, is the spirit of God.<sup>20</sup> Mozoomdar also believed that the spirit of God is working in the midst of all religious communities to bring about a great harmony. He provided an example of that harmony in the faith and practice of Brahmo- Samaj, "where the Spirit of God is all in all, both for worship and the sanctity of personal character."<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, it was not Mozoomdar but the Orthodox theologian George Khodr that Samartha was greatly indebted to in developing a Pneumatological approach. In an article published in 1971, Khodr anticipates theological issues arising at the WCC Assembly meeting in Canabera in 1991. Khodr, Metropolitan of the Mount Lebanon Diocese of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch of Beirut Lebanon presented a paper to the meeting of the World Council of Churches central committee that inaugurated the World Council of Churches' programme on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths at Addis Ababa in 1971 in which he suggested a pneumatological interpretation of the economy of the Holy Spirit in relation to the World religions. In this article, "Christianity in a Pluralist World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit"<sup>22</sup> Khodr raised the theological issue of

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<sup>19</sup> Mozoomdar, P.C., *The Spirit of God*, (Geo. H. Ellis: Boston), 1894, p.300.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.304.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.308.

<sup>22</sup> Khodr, G., "Christianity in a Pluralist World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in *Ecumenical Review*, Vol.23 January - December 1971.

“Christ’s presence outside Christian history”<sup>23</sup> and attempted to answer this issue from the contextual framework of Orthodox ecclesiology.

Khodr started theological reflection with making references to Acts of the Apostles, particularly Paul’s Areopagus speech (Acts 17:22 ff) that Athenians worshipped “true God without recognizing Him as the Creator.” In other words, Athenians were “Christians without knowing it.”<sup>24</sup> Laying this Biblical foundation, Khodr examined the Apostolic Fathers to determine if there is any truth “independent of the direct action of God.” In this regard Khodr examined Clement of Alexandria (150-215) who argued that *logos*, incarnated in Christ as the source of all human rationality for “the Logos of God ordered the world, and above all this microcosm man, through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>25</sup> Origen of Alexandria (185- 254) stressed two levels of faith as physical and symbolic. The physical represented the literal and the symbolic represented the philosophical/ mystical. In light of this, Origen interpreted the incarnated *logos* in Christ as the literal. On the other hand Christ symbolically understood is the fulfillment of all true philosophy. It is in this connection that Origen represented “philosophy as knowledge of the true God.” In so doing Origen was able to recognize elements of “the Divine” in the pagan religions. Khodr also mentioned Irenaeus (130-200) who recognized the Spirit infusing humankind with the “likeness” of God which fulfills the “image” of God in each human being.<sup>26</sup>

After examining the Church Fathers’ theological view on the presence of God outside the Church, Khodr turned his attention to the Holy Spirit. Quoting Lossky, Khodr argued that “Pentecost is not a ‘continuation’ of the incarnation, it is its sequel, its consequence ... creation has become capable of receiving the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> There is no limitation imposed on the work of the Spirit. Therefore, Khodr wrote, “the Spirit is present everywhere by virtue of an economy distinct from that of the Son.”<sup>28</sup> In doing this, Khodr applied the Orthodox doctrine of the single procession of the Spirit from the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.119

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.120.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.121.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.125.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp.125- 126.



Father - the western doctrine expresses the double procession, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son (*Filioque*). Furthermore, Khodr argued that “since Pentecost it is He [Spirit] who makes Christ present” and quoting Irenaeus “where the Spirit is, there also is the Church.”<sup>29</sup>

Based on this theology, Khodr argued that “we could, from this angle, regard the non-Christian religions as points where His [the Spirit’s] inspiration is at work.”<sup>30</sup> In this freedom of God, people of other faiths are able to receive God’s grace because:

Any reading of religions is a reading of Christ. It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahmin, A Buddhist, or a Muhammadan [sic] reading his own scriptures.<sup>31</sup>

In light of this, the Church’s mission “will be directed towards awakening the Christ who sleeps in the night of the religions.”<sup>32</sup> According to Khodr, the tasks for Church mission are seeking to develop a right attitude of respect for the mystery of the economy of the Holy Spirit which will discern the truth that is present in other religions “according to the breath of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Another task is “to penetrate beyond the symbols and historical forms and discover the profound intention of religious men, and to relate their apprehension of divinity to the object of our Christian hope.”<sup>34</sup> In this connection, Khodr was anticipating the theological discourses on contextualization/indigenization. The Church is also called to live in communion with other religions and “to identify all the Christic values in other religions, to show them Christ as the bond which unites them and his love as their fulfillment.”<sup>35</sup>

However, whereas Khodr employed Orthodox Pneumatology to engage with people of other faiths, Samartha was applying it to challenge Protestant theology by broadening its view of God. Furthermore, Samartha neglected the important point that Khodr’s

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.128.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.127.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 128.



Orthodox theology connected the economy of the Spirit and Christ closely together. According to Kim, Samartha uses Orthodox theology as “a jumping off point” to his own theological enterprise.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.3 Pneumatological perspective on religious pluralism

Samartha out of his own experience and theological reflection attempted to balance, on one hand, the Christian commitment, and on the other hand an openness to people of other faiths. He believed that people of other faiths should not be objects of our discussions but partners through engagements with persons of other faith traditions. In light of this, Samartha challenges us to “rethink” Christian formulations of faith in the context of religious pluralism. This is an important shift in theological thinking because people of other faith traditions are no longer subscribed to as “non- Christians” but as people who have experienced different but valid faith convictions. Thus for Samartha engaging with religious pluralism is not merely to substitute one religious tradition over or against the other, but rather to construct a view of different religions that will work out new expressions of Christian faith.

Samartha’s affirmation that all people are within the realm of the Spirit of God challenged the confessional orthodoxy which limits the work of the Spirit within the activity of the Church. He pointed out that in the current discourses the activity of the Holy Spirit is limited to the Church and to the “secular” world. There is no reference to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people of other faiths. Thus, he wanted to liberate the Spirit of God from “the monopolistic possession of the Judaeo-Christian tradition” and recognize the ‘wider” activity of the Holy Spirit. In Samartha’s opinion, the extension of the presence and activity of the Spirit will provide “greater freedom ... to breathe freely through the whole oikoumene which includes not only Christians but neighbors of other faiths and ideological convictions.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kim, K., op.cit., p.36.

<sup>37</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1991, p.36.

Samartha started his theological reflection with the observation that all human life is located “within the purview of God’s activity.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, everyone has a common ‘future’ which makes them ‘interdependent’ in their “search for the meaning of life and existence.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in Samartha’s understanding, the term “Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of Christ” referred to God’s presence and activity in the world. To draw any distinction between is “like trying to slice a flowing river with a razor blade.”<sup>40</sup>

Samartha observed that the Spirit of God cannot be limited to the Church or the individual believer. In this respect, he agreed with Devanandan who had argued that the Spirit of God is not only working within the Church but also working outside the Church.<sup>41</sup> In doing this, Samartha provided two theological presuppositions. The first was the understanding that the Holy Spirit is present and active in every personal experience of the Divine. Thus, every encounter between God and human beings must be the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The other presupposition was that the Holy Spirit is active in the entire economy of salvation. There is not a person, not a tribe that falls outside the economy of God’s salvation. In this context, other religious traditions are a valid expression of God’s love to humanity. Other religions then are not secondary means of becoming Christians. The Christian tradition is simply a different narrative of understanding the same Ultimate reality.

Making reference to the Orthodox, the Vatican Council II statements and the WCC documents, Samartha suggested that there is a recognition that the Spirit is the one “who has spoken through the prophets.” This recognition was to include Old Testament passages that affirm the work of the Spirit. In these passages, the work of the Spirit is extended to the people of Israel. Thus, pointing to the fact that the Spirit had been operative even before Jesus of Nazareth. Samartha argued this understanding helps us to discern the Spirit’s relation to people of other faiths:

By acknowledging that the Spirit was at work and spoke through the prophets of Israel before Christ, one is perhaps opening the door a little

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<sup>38</sup> Samartha, S., op. cit. 1981, p.63.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.64.

<sup>41</sup> Devanandan, P., *Preparation for Dialogue*, (CISRS: Bangalore), 1964, p.117.

more widely for the prophets of other faiths to be ‘smuggled’ into God’s oikoumene.<sup>42</sup>

Samartha also examined the connection between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Samartha observed that in Acts 2:37-38 Samartha observes that baptism and Holy Spirit are connected in the sense that it was to those who were baptized that the Spirit descended. However, Samartha saw that in the situation of the mission to Samaria (Acts 4:17), conversion of Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10), and Paul’s meeting with the converted disciples of John (Acts 19:1-7) the Spirit was given without baptism or before it. Samartha argued that someone baptized in the name of Jesus may be living in the power of the Spirit but the Spirit does not operate on the basis of whether one is baptized or not. What this means for Spirit’s relation to the people of other faiths is that “the possibility of the Spirit being present and active among those who are not baptized and in communities outside the visible boundaries of the institutional church.”<sup>43</sup> He provided examples of people from Hindu and Muslim faiths that believe in Jesus Christ but do not wish to be baptized. He suggested that the Spirit is not absent in the lives of these people and argued for an “unbaptized koinonia” outside the Church. In this connection, in another article he commented that the Pneumatological paradigm offered us “more theological space and greater spiritual freedom to grasp the outreach of God’s revelation in the world.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, there is freedom for the Spirit’s presence and work in this world.

The concern of Biblical writers according to Samartha was to discern the work of the Spirit among the community of the faithful and as such it cannot make a “negative judgment” on people of other faiths which are unknown to the Biblical writers. Therefore, “how then can theologians use them [Biblical texts] now as criteria to pass judgments on Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and others?”<sup>45</sup> The answer for Samartha was that while the Bible is the criterion for the Christian community it is not the criterion by which people of other faiths are to be judged. Therefore in regards to discerning

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.78.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.79.

<sup>44</sup> Samartha, S., “The Holy Spirit and the Revelation of God in emerging India,” *Emerging Indian and the Word of God*, Paul Puthanangady (ed), (NBCLC: Banagalore) 2000, p.29.

<sup>45</sup> Samartha, S., op. cit. 1981, p.67.

whether the Spirit is active in other religions one needs to examine religious traditions of people of other faiths.

Samartha also examined the Nicene Creed as it is confessed in the Western Churches that defines Holy Spirit as “the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” He saw merit in the Eastern Orthodox Churches confession that the Holy Spirit proceeds directly from the Father - the Eastern Orthodox themselves stand firmly on the Nicene Creed in its original wording, without the *filioque*. In so doing, he attempted to draw a middle ground that recognizes the theological insights of both traditions. However, Samartha dismissed the *filioque* clause in favor of the Eastern Orthodox because there will be “more theological space” in seeking relationship with people of other faiths. He argued that the Nicene Creed that declares Holy Spirit jointly proceeds from the Father and the Son is limited in the sense that “the flow of the Spirit is restricted to the Christo-monistic channel, limited to the Church and only through the agency of the Church to the rest of humanity.”<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, if as the Greek Orthodox confesses that the Father is the sole source of the Spirit then “there will be far more theological space for the Spirit proceeding from the Father to breathe freely through the whole *oikoumene* which includes neighbors of other faiths as well.”<sup>47</sup>

This leads to the question of the criteria to discern the activity of the Spirit in other religious traditions. Samartha wrote:

The question today is not so much whether or not the Spirit is at work among people of other faiths as how to discern the presence and work of the Spirit among those who live outside the visible boundary of the Church in the world where Christians live and work together with their neighbors of other faiths and ideological convictions.<sup>48</sup>

Since the Spirit “blows where it wills” Samartha argued that “no doctrine about the Spirit is likely to provide a basis to discuss the Spirit’s relation to people of other faiths.” Instead, he looked for the actual working of the Spirit in people of other faiths. In this

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.86.

connection, Samartha looked for the characteristics of the “fruits of the Spirit” as attested in the Bible to serve as “pointers” in discerning the work of the Spirit in the lives of the people. He pointed to the “fruits of the Spirit” as found in Galatians 5:22 as the best way to discern the activity of God in people of other faiths. Samartha argued:

Wherever the fruits of the Spirit are to be found- ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self- control’ (Gal.5:22) - whether in the lives of Christians or neighbors of other faiths... these are visible and readily recognizable signs which do not need elaborate theological investigations.<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere Samartha pointed out that the Spirit represents life, vitality, creativity and growth and the Spirit “symbolizes” community that fosters love, sharing and fellowship.<sup>50</sup> This ethical discernment in the lives of people then becomes the sign of the Spirit. Having said this, Samartha cautioned us that the contemporary working of the Holy Spirit would mean “getting into areas as yet unfamiliar to most of us, so that we should look for existential rather than conceptual criteria.”<sup>51</sup>

Samartha probed further to see whether the presence and the work of the Spirit go beyond the realm of “religions” into the realm of history itself. If this so then it raises the question of whether the Spirit of Christ is identical with the Spirit at work in Buddha, Gandhi Marx, and Mohammed. He eloquently wrote:

“How do Christians clarify to themselves theologically the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the activity of God’s Spirit among people of different religious traditions and ideological persuasions? Is it the same Spirit that brooded upon the waters over all creation, spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament, was present with Jesus... which also activated Yajnavalkya, the Buddha,...Gandhi, Marx and Mao Tse Tung? Or is there a qualitative difference? If so, on the basis of what criteria?”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.88.

<sup>50</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 2000, pp.37-38.

<sup>51</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, p.74.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.65.

The question is never answered. However, he referred to Isaiah 44:28, where Cyrus is called “the Lord’s shepherd” and asked why the revolution under Gandhi or Castro should not be seen as another exodus. “Does not the Spirit of God touch other people in their history to transform a certain moment from being part of mere *Chronos* to become a significant *Kairos*?”<sup>53</sup> Samartha argued that one can recognize the Spirit of God at work wherever life, order and community are found: “Wherever these marks are found- life, order and community- one should sense the work of the Spirit.”<sup>54</sup> He was concerned not so much about conceptual criteria but existential ways to discern the work of the Spirit. In this regard, he commented, “reflection on the work of the Spirit may be subordinated to a readiness to be led by the Spirit together with the partners into the depths of God’s mystery.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, meeting the needs of our neighbor is more important than the theological beliefs we share. Thus, he urged the Church to “break out of the narrow corridors of *heilsgeschichte* theology...” and to be involved in common concerns with people of other faiths.<sup>56</sup>

Samartha warned that the Holy Spirit “often defies control and systemization,” hence one must avoid creating strict criteria for the Spirit to work.<sup>57</sup> He saw the Spirit at work in the act of self-sacrifice and good-will performed by people belonging to one particular faith community for the benefit of those living in another religious tradition.<sup>58</sup> In other words the fruits of the Spirit, especially love, joy and peace became the criteria for discerning the Spirit in building up the community in a pluralistic context. Samartha concluded:

Spirit means life, not death, and so vitality, creativity, and growth. Spirit means order, not chaos, and so meaning, significance, and truth become important. Spirit means community, not separation, and so sharing, fellowship, bearing one another’s burden is another mark. Wherever these marks are found- life order and community – there one should sense the work of the Spirit.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.74.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>57</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 2000, p.36.

<sup>58</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, pp.58-59.

This awareness of the Spirit in the world means that there can be a “spirituality of commitment and openness” towards people of other faiths. In so doing he rejected the dominant criterion that the Holy Spirit “points to the cross and resurrection and witnesses to the Lordship of Christ.” Therefore, he subscribed to the criterion of Christ-likeness rather than belief in Christ. This offered a way for Samartha to go beyond the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

### 3.4 God as Mystery

Samartha cannot understand the allegation that non-Christian religions whose resources have provided “spiritual sustenance, theological direction, and ethical guidance” to their adherents be labelled as containing “fundamental errors.”<sup>59</sup> When Samartha refers to God, he often uses the term “mystery.” The theme of God as mystery first appeared in “the Mystery and Meaning of God.” In this article he referred to Biblical, patristic and Upanishadic texts, and commented that one should not forget the “inexhaustible Mystery of God” in relation to God’s revelation.<sup>60</sup> In *the Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, Samartha wrote about the “mystery and depth in God” referring to God’s love.<sup>61</sup> According to his understanding, God’s activity in the world is like “groping after a mystery.”<sup>62</sup> In *Courage and Dialogue*, he used the term “mystery” in order to understand the Hindu and Christian responses to the truth.<sup>63</sup>

It is evident from his works that Samartha’s idea of “mystery” is derived from the *advaita* tradition of Hindu philosophy which provides the ontological basis of the divine reality. According to Samartha, *Advaita Vedanta* tradition described mystery as Brahman,<sup>64</sup> which provided a “point of unity to all plurality.”<sup>65</sup> Samartha defined Mystery as:

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<sup>59</sup> Samartha, S. J., “Mission in a Religiously Plural World,” *International Review of Missions*, 78/307 July 1988, p.311.

<sup>60</sup> Klootwijk, E., op.cit, p.225.

<sup>61</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1974, p.191.

<sup>62</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, p.37

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.149.

<sup>64</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit, 1991, p.76.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.4.



This mystery, the Truth of the Truth (Satyasa Satyam), is the transcendent Centre that remains always beyond and greater than apprehensions of it or even the sum total of those apprehensions. It is beyond cognitive knowledge (tarka) but it is open to vision (dristi) and intuition (anubhava). It is near yet far, knowable yet unknowable, intimate yet ultimate ....<sup>66</sup>

What this means is that human rationality cannot fully express or grasp the "Mystery." Furthermore, in reflecting and experiencing the "mystery" no one religious tradition has fully understood it. Samartha argued that different religious traditions are different responses to the "mystery." Each tradition is neither the same nor one tradition better than the others. Each tradition contributes to others in a way that would benefit the whole community. In this connection, Samartha can write that Jesus Christ is the way for Christians in the sense that there is something in Christianity that is exclusive which no other religions have. This is the "uniqueness" of Christ, but at the same time, Christians need to acknowledge that other religious traditions have "uniqueness" which Christians need to listen to. In terms of religious language, different religious expressions are different responses which are culturally and historically conditioned. Therefore, one may designate Mystery as God or Brahman without denying the experiences of the ultimate reality. Samartha wrote:

Both the terms 'Brahman' and "God" are culture-conditioned. One could as well use the term mystery, which may be more acceptable. In this case the two statements- namely, that 'Brahman is sat-cit-ananda' and "God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"- could be regarded as two responses to the same Mystery in two cultural settings.<sup>67</sup>

Therefore neither claim has any inherent right to be "the truer" representation of the mystery.

By appealing to "Mystery of God," Samartha was able to utilize the Indian philosophical tradition of *Advaita Vedanta* thus providing a contextual ontological basis for dialogue

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<sup>66</sup> Samartha, S. J., "The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a multireligious culture," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.) (Orbis: New York), 1987, p.75.

<sup>67</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1987, p.76.

in that it recognized various ultimate realities without reducing it to a common denominator.

### 3.5 Christology

This understanding of the mystery notably raises the question of the Lordship of Christ in the context of religious pluralism. The challenge for Samartha was how to affirm the Lordship of Christ in a religiously pluralistic context:

Does universality mean simply the extension of Christian particularity? What happens if our neighbours of other faiths also have similar notions of universality, that is, of extending their particularities?<sup>68</sup>

In this connection there are two theological views of Samartha, the first of which he articulated before being director of the World Council of Church's department on dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies. This view is less open to other religious faiths than his latter view which was more positive towards world religions. Thus, Chandra S Soans whose PhD thesis examined Samartha's theology points out that from 1949 to 1960, all his sermons, Bible Studies and correspondence embraced a Christocentric model. For instance in a statement before the home committee of the Basel mission on December 05, 1951 Samartha said, "for the Church to be the Church it must take up the full responsibility for its primary task in India- evangelism.... For the Church exists by its mission, as the fire exists by burning."<sup>69</sup> Thus, Samartha prioritized evangelism, mission and preaching the uniqueness of Christ.

It is in *the Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* that Samartha's innovative thought about Christology first appeared. After surveying how selected Hindu thinkers have responded to Christ, Samartha devoted one chapter to developing an Indian Christology on the basis of *Advaita Vedanta* tradition. However, Samuel Rayan has observed that while Samartha "explored" *Advaita* as a basis for Christology, he stopped short of fully

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<sup>68</sup> Samartha, S. J., "The Lordship of Christ and Religious Pluralism," *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (eds.) (Orbis Books: N.Y.), 1980, p.19.

<sup>69</sup> Soans, C.S., *Dialogue and/or Mission: An Approach to the Theology of Stanley Samartha*, (Princeton Theological Seminary: Princeton), 1999, PhD, p.166.

developing it.<sup>70</sup> Samartha used the term “unbound Christ” to denote that Christianity does not exhaust the person and work of Christ. However this did not mean that Samartha embraced the “hidden Christ” within Hinduism. He rejected the “unknown Christ of Hinduism” developed by Panikkar as open to serious misunderstanding by Hindus. Instead he explored the notion of the “unbound Christ” active in the history of the people of India.<sup>71</sup>

In his later writings, the christo-centric approach has been revised in order to have an open commitment to people of other faiths. In his book *One Christ many Religions-toward a Revised Christology*, the shift from an exclusivist commitment to Christ to pluralist position is clearly evident. In this journey Samartha by-passed the inclusivist approach. Soans describes two reasons for Samartha’s rejection of inclusivism. Firstly, his personal conviction that to include religious categories of people of other faiths without their permission is wrong. Secondly, Samartha disagrees with the notion that Christ is present in each person’s religious tradition although they do not know it. According to Samartha, if we speak about the unknown Christ of Hinduism, we must also allow them to speak about the unknown Krishna of Christianity.<sup>72</sup>

In this book, Samartha examined the New Testament evidence for the confession of the Lordship of Christ and finds the affirmation in the death and resurrection of Christ. He wrote that the confession of Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour reaches “its high-water mark” in Philippians 2:1-11, Colossians 1:15-20, and Ephesians 1:15-23. Samartha also recognised that in the first and second century when the Church did not have any political or military power, Christians could “sing hymns of victory and praise to God through Jesus Christ without any sense of Christian triumphalism.”<sup>73</sup> If this could be done in the second and third century then is it not possible that the Church in India today can profess Christ as the only saviour without any sense of triumphalism? Samartha does not think so because in the very next sentence he wrote:

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<sup>70</sup> Rayan, S., “Review of Stanley Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*,” *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 66, April 1977, p.188.

<sup>71</sup> Soans, C.S., op. cit. p.167.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1980, p.19.

It is equally extraordinary that the connection between suffering and victory, between emptying and exaltation, between the servanthood and the kingship of Christ should be missed in the triumphalistic advance of Christianity as a religion and the establishment of the Church as an institution.<sup>74</sup>

Samartha revised the traditional Christology of the Church and emphasised the universality of Christ which is not bound to the Church. He wrote, "Christianity belongs to Christ. Christ does not belong to Christianity."<sup>75</sup> He replaced the "exclusive" understanding of Christ with "relational distinctiveness." He defined this new term as follows:

It is relational because Christ does not remain unrelated to neighbours of other faiths and distinctive because without recognizing the distinctiveness of the great religious traditions as different responses to the Mystery of God, no mutual enrichment is possible.<sup>76</sup>

Samartha, then, preferred the term 'distinctiveness' as being helpful for him to embrace other responses to the Mystery. Furthermore, he rejected "Christomonism" which emphasised that the God is only understood in terms of Jesus Christ. Here he was making the distinction between Jesus being divine and Jesus being God: "It is one thing to say that Jesus of Nazareth is divine and quite another thing to say that Jesus of Nazareth is God."<sup>77</sup> The exclusive sayings of Jesus as found especially in John's Gospel are regarded as later developments which reflect the confession of the early Church. According to Samartha, Jesus never claimed to be God. He always pointed to God. Samartha wrote, 'without a revised Christology it is almost unlikely that the renewing activity of God in Christ and the creative and sustaining power of the Spirit can make a serious contribution ...to the struggle of people of other faiths for a just society.'<sup>78</sup> An exclusive understanding of Christ, Samartha wrote "minimize[d] the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others." A revised Christology can occur not through diminishing

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1974, p.10.

<sup>76</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1991, p.77.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.95.

or diluting the “centrality of Jesus Christ” but “through a much greater sensitivity to the working of the Spirit within human consciousness in history and in nature.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, in Jesus Christ an “icon” of salvation is seen. Christians know this and must witness this. However this does not mean Muslims or Hindus need to accept Christ in order to be saved. It is the Holy Spirit that brings non-Christians to salvation the way the Spirit wills but not the way Christians know it.

Without denying the centrality of Christ for Christians, Samartha relativised the normativity of Christ. As such he shifted from an exclusivist Christology of salvation in Christ only to the possibility of other revelations of God in history. This Christology according to Samartha “provides the basis and power for Christians in their lives of worship, service, and witness in a religiously plural world.”<sup>80</sup>

### 3.6 Dialogue

The beginning of the decade of the 1970’s was a time of new insights that called for transformation of ‘old’ practices and attitudes towards people of other faiths. Samartha was convinced that dialogue is rooted in the Christian faith. In “Dialogue as a continuing Christian Concern” he asked, “why are we, as Christians, in dialogue with men of other faiths at all?” Samartha argued Christians should participate in dialogue because the Spirit and the quest for the truth are linked. He based this on John 16:13 which stated the Holy Spirit shall lead to all truth. By doing this, Samartha was expanding the understanding of Holy Spirit to go beyond the Church. In other words, for Samartha, the Holy Spirit embraces all humanity.

Samartha defined dialogue as “an attempt to understand and express our particularity not just in terms of our own heritage but also in relation to the spiritual heritage of our neighbors.”<sup>81</sup> He called for dialogue because God has relativised Himself to us in Jesus Christ. This idea of “relativising” God and Christ is to make the point that truth - as in God and Christ - is relational in the sense that God / Christ relate to the lives of all

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.154.

<sup>81</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, p.99.

people. This “relativises” God and Christ in historical terms, but not in ontological reality. In a sense, Samartha was trying to explain incarnation. In this understanding God remains absolute and eternal but enters into the historical, cultural world of human relationships. God in Jesus Christ has himself entered into relationship with men of all faiths and all ages, offering the good news of salvation. According to Samartha that allegiance of Christians is not to Christianity as a religion, nor to the cultural expressions of Christianity, “but to God who, at the very point where he reveals himself in Jesus Christ, liberates us from our particular bondages in order to have new relations with our neighbors in the larger community.”<sup>82</sup>

So the fundamental reason for Christians to be in dialogue is Jesus Christ. Samartha wrote, the “basis on which Christians enter into and continue their dialogue with others is their faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has become man on behalf of all people of all ages and of all cultures.”<sup>83</sup> To be in dialogue then is to continue the work of Christ. However, Samartha pointed out that while for the Christian Christ is the reason we enter into dialogue, this did not mean that Christ is absolute. In other words, Samartha wanted to relativise the absoluteness of Christ stating that if God have relativised in Jesus Christ, the question for Christians is “whether they are justified in absolutizing in doctrine whom God has relativised in history.”<sup>84</sup>

This led Samartha to suggest that Christians can enter into dialogue with people of other faiths because in dialogue there is the offer of community by Jesus Christ. Samartha insisted that the quest for community was central to the Christian faith. In the ministry of Jesus, Samartha saw Jesus crossing over religious and social boundaries to create community and unite people into the household of God. Christians are called to build a universal community of freedom and in this process we are to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths. This Samartha believed is the primary concern of the Church.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.98.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1987, p.69.

Like two sides of the same coin, Samartha argued that on one side there should be commitment to one's faith while being open to the "other."<sup>85</sup> The ultimate goal of dialogue then being that:

Where people meet in freedom and expectation, there are moments when the particular labels that partners wear lose their importance and that which is behind and beyond them breaks through in spiritual freedom, offering a vision of the ultimate that holds them together.<sup>86</sup>

This theology of dialogue Samartha advocated in Geneva "is now stamped on the theology of the WCC."<sup>87</sup>

### 3.7 Hermeneutics

In the search for new hermeneutics in Asian Christian Theology, Stanley Samartha assessed the current state of Indian Christian hermeneutical approach. His question was:

How can the Bible, a Semitic book formed through oral and written traditions in an entirely different geographic, historical and cultural context, appropriated and interpreted for so many centuries by the West through hermeneutic tools designed to meet different needs and shaped by different historical factors, now be interpreted in Asia by Asian Christians for their own people?<sup>88</sup>

To answer this question, Samartha attempted to identify the hermeneutical tradition of Indian people. Klootwijk, in his *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the work of Stanley J. Samartha*, points out several presuppositions behind this hermeneutical question. Firstly, the Bible is seen as culturally conditioned by its historical context. In other words, the Bible is the expression of a faith experience of a particular community in a particular time. Secondly, there exists a gap between "then" and "now." Thirdly, western hermeneutical

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<sup>85</sup> Samartha, S. J., "The Progress and Promise of Inter-religious dialogues," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1972, pp.473-474.

<sup>86</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, p.98.

<sup>87</sup> Kim, K, op.cit., p.29.

<sup>88</sup> Samartha, S. J., *The Search for New Hermeneutics in Asian Christian Theology*, (Madras: CLS), 1987, p.45.



tools to bridge this gap are also culturally conditioned. Therefore, western hermeneutics are inadequate to function as a viable method of Indian Christian hermeneutics. Finally, the question of inspiration and authority, therefore, needs to be discussed differently in India in comparison with the west.<sup>89</sup>

Samartha wanted to enter into the Asian context with the understanding of the Bible as the only book of God's deeds is to cut off all conversations with the people of other faiths. The question Samartha wrestled with was in a religiously plural world, can the authority of one scripture be extended to operate over other communities of faith who have their own scripture? He recognised that other religious narratives provide spiritual support and theological guidance to people of their particular tradition. Christians cannot ignore or abandon this fact. This did not mean that the Bible becomes less authoritative for Christians. He believed the Bible remained normative for all Christians at all places at all time. According to Samartha:

Recognising that people of other faiths also have their own scriptures, do (sic) not in any way dilute or minimise or compromise the authority and normatively (sic) of the Bible for Christians. The Bible remains normative for all Christians at all times in their life of witness and service in the world.<sup>90</sup>

What is normative is not that every word and comma is inspired or true, but that the Bible like other religious narratives becomes authoritative in new situations through new interpretations.<sup>91</sup> In other words, Samartha did not endorse the view that the Bible is the deposit of "the infallible truth." He was also very critical of viewing the Bible as the sole authority in a scripturally pluralistic context. He commented:

In a multi-religious society the criteria derived on the basis of one particular scripture of one particular community of faith cannot be used to pass negative judgements on other scriptures regarded as equally

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<sup>89</sup> Klootwijk, E., op. cit. p.209.

<sup>90</sup> Samartha, S. J., "Religion, Language and Reality: Towards a relational Hermeneutics," in *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. II, 1991, p. 350

<sup>91</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1991, p.64.

authoritative by communities of faith living side by side with Christians.<sup>92</sup>

In a scripturally pluralistic context, Samartha wanted to draw on the hermeneutical insights of other traditions in interpreting the Bible. In other words, the recognition that there are other ways of interpreting the reality should be accepted within the larger framework of religious pluralism.

### 3.8 Mission

Samartha's definition of mission has a Pneumatological orientation. Samartha defined mission as "God's continuing activity through the Spirit to mend the brokenness of creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity, and to heal the rift between humanity, nature and God."<sup>93</sup> He acknowledged the contribution of mission organizations towards the social and economic transformations of society. Moreover, Samartha had been a constant critic of the traditional understanding of mission as the enterprise to convert people of one faith to another which he saw as arrogant and undermining the dignity of non-Christians. In one instance, Samartha argued that the word "mission" should be avoided and the term "witness" used instead. The reason according to Samartha was "not to hide the genuine Christian intention, but to remove a term which has become a threat to other particularities and a hindrance to open relationships."<sup>94</sup> Writing on the debate on "the Freedom of Religion Bill" in India Samartha wrote:

Terms such as 'evangelistic campaign,' 'missionary strategy,' 'campus crusade,' 'occupying non-Christian areas,' a 'blitzkrieg' of missionaries, 'sending re-enforcements' and the like sound more appropriate to military enterprise than to Christian witness to God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. The statistical approach implied in the words 'the unreached two billions' is derogatory to our neighbours of other faiths. Unreached by whom?<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1987, p. 49.

<sup>93</sup> Samartha, S. J., op.cit. 1991, p.149.

<sup>94</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1981, pp.101-102.

<sup>95</sup> Samartha, S. J., 'Partners in Community: Some Reflections on Hindu Christians Relations Today,' *Occasional Bulletin*, 4/2, April 1980, p.80.

According to Samartha, the mission was “very largely shaped in the colonial era, with its Europe dominated history, Church centred theology, and un-examined assumptions of Western superiority in race, culture and religion”<sup>96</sup> The consequence of this “dependence” on the “west” was lack of contextual explorations. In other words, the reliance on being consumers of western theology has left the Indian Christians as a “foreign” community in the Indian culture. Samartha calls the Church in India to “give up these attitudes.”<sup>97</sup>

However, Samartha has acknowledged that the enduring values of Christian mission are not always negative. As a matter of fact, he recognised that the Christian Church emerged in India because of mission. Through the Christian mission, Jesus Christ was made known to the people of India and it resulted in Hindu response to Christ. The social and economic benefits received through Christian missions, Samartha pointed out was noteworthy. However, “gratefulness to the past should not become a roadblock to the possibility of understanding and practicing mission in new ways in the future.”<sup>98</sup>

Samartha not only believed that there are other missionary oriented religions but that each of those missions is God’s mission. In this sense there is no “uniqueness” about the Christian mission. The Church’s mission is one among many. This inclusive understanding of mission sees God’s eternal purpose unfold in different ways in different places in ways that are beyond our understanding. However, this did not mean that every expression of other faiths is valid or that everything that happens outside the Church is necessarily the saving activity of God.

The question for Samartha was not whether Christians should be engaged in mission but what kind of mission. In this connection, Samartha’s concept of mission became an important topic because it is closely linked with his concept of dialogue. Samartha’s understanding of mission was influenced by the concept of *Missio Dei* - mission as

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Samartha, S. J., “Christians and Neighbors of Other Faiths in Asia: A search for new Relationships,” *Ching Feng*, 30/3, 1987, p.146.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Klootwijk, E., op. cit. 1992, p.303.

God's mission.<sup>99</sup> *Missio Dei* was originally referred to as a way to escape from the notion of western Church's mission to the East where there was an unequal relationship between the Churches in the West and in the East. In the 1970's *Missio Dei*, began to be used in intra-Christian ecumenical terms in a way in which different religions are able to participate. Samartha accepted "*Missio Dei*" because it denoted God's creative relationship with the world. In this sense it is fundamental to Christian vocation, the purpose being to participate in the *Missio Dei*. People of other faiths may do the same.

For Samartha the Christian mission does not make negative judgements about people of other faiths. Mission, according to him, meant participating in God's continuing mission in the world. In this model, the mission is God's mission and Church has no monopolizing authority. Samartha argued that since God is active in history the mission of the Church is one particular response to God's continuing activity. All religious traditions together are able to contribute to "the pool of human values such as justice and compassion, truth and righteousness' for the sustenance of the quality of life."<sup>100</sup>

One of the major issues that need further reflection is the relationship between mission and conversion. Samartha acknowledged that without conversion there would not have been Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism in India. However, he argued that in the contemporary context, words like mission and conversion are negatively looked upon because of the notion that mission is inherently interconnected with "military conquest, political domination, and economic exploitation." He argued that the rich and the powerful were the primary "instruments" in the expansion of Christianity as a religion and they came with claims of 'exclusiveness' and seeking to "overcome and displace" other religions.<sup>101</sup> He wrote:

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<sup>99</sup> One of the first to develop the concept of *missio Dei* was Karl Hartenstein. See Hartenstein, K., "Theologische Besinnung," Freytag, W. (ed.), *Mission Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, (Stuttgart), 1952; Vicedom, G.F., *Missio Dei, Einfuhrung in eine Theologie der Mission*, (Munich), 1958; Rosin, H. H. and Winsen, A. C. Van G., "*Missio Dei*": an Examination of the Origin, Contents and Function of the Term in Protestant Missiological Discussion, (Leiden), 1972.

<sup>100</sup> Samartha, S. J., "Mission in a Religiously Plural World: Looking beyond Tambaram, 1938," *International Review of Mission*, 78/307 July 1988, pp.323-324.

<sup>101</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit. 1991, p.169.

Conversion, instead of being a vertical movement towards God, a genuine renewal of life, has become a horizontal movement of groups of people from one community to another, very often backed by economic affluence, organizational strength and technological power. It also disturbs the political life of the country by influencing the voting patterns of people. Why then should Christians be surprised when the very words “mission” and “conversion” provoke so much anxiety, suspicion and fear.<sup>102</sup>

The mission of the Church empowered by the Spirit is to not to convert people to Christianity but “to invite people to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>103</sup> However, Samartha was reluctant to have people changing religious affinities. In viewing conversion as problematic rather than liberative put him in sharp contrast with Dalit theologians such as A.P. Nirmal who had argued people of lower caste origins may find in Christianity a sense of identity. Samartha saw his own identity as a Christian as a result of his birth into a Christian community.<sup>104</sup> In the multi-religious context of India, Samartha’s renunciation and re-interpretation of conversion avoids the confrontation on a contentious issue.<sup>105</sup> Thus, the implication of conversion is not addressed.

For Samartha the Christian mission originates with God; that mission is God’s “continuous” activity to reconcile and heal the brokenness of creation and in that the Church participate in God’s mission with all of God’s children.

### 3.9 Critical appraisal of Samartha’s use of Pneumatology

Samartha’s theology sought to address an Indian contextual issue of religious pluralism. But his theological writings in India were influenced by his experience from the World Council of Churches and thus ultimately became a western theological discourse back in India.

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<sup>102</sup> Samartha, S.J., op. cit., 1988, p.321.

<sup>103</sup> Samartha, S. J., op. cit., 1991, p.153.

<sup>104</sup> Samartha, S., *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*, (WCC: Geneva), 1996, p.9.

<sup>105</sup> Kerr, D., “Christian Understandings of Proselytism,” *IBMR* 23/1 January 1999, pp.8-14.

Stanley Samartha was correct in his observation that in the past Christianity largely went hand in hand with colonialism and consequently had a devastating effect on Indian culture. However, in contemporary India, most of the missions and Churches have been established by indigenous mission agencies and natives. So the image of Christianity as a western religion propagated by foreign missionaries is gradually declining. Samartha failed to take account of this new development in his critique of Indian Church missions. In other words, the mission field is much more complex than Samartha sets out. To ignore this reality in favor of the “vision and excitement of the ecumenical movement” is doing injustice to the Church in India.

Samartha’s identification of the “mystery” with a particular *Advaitic* Hindu tradition needs close scrutiny. According to Jathana, professor at the United Theological College, Bangalore, interpreting the “mystery” from within the framework of *Advaita Vedanta* results in a Christianity that is “reduced to a sub-species of Advaita Vedanta... and a Christianity that “loses all its distinctive and decisive characteristic features.”<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, despite his understanding of Dalit movements and theology, Samartha set aside these issues in favour of endorsing Brahmanic spirituality. In other words, Samartha’s philosophical interest with *Advaita Vedanta* tradition does not engage sufficiently with Dalit tradition. Therefore, Samartha’s theology ultimately becomes an elitist theology.

When Samartha writes God’s presence can be discerned in India, he meant God is active in the history of India. However, the question needs to be raised as to whose history. There are many who recognise the activity of God not in the national history of the hegemonic cultures of the nation but the “counter cultures” and grassroots movements which are largely suppressed by the mainline cultures.

In the discussion of the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ seems to refer to what God has done through Christ (Romans 8:9) and to the promise Jesus Christ made to his disciples in the

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<sup>106</sup> Jathana, O.V., “Indian Christian Theology: Methodological Reflections,” *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. 23, No.2-3, April-September 1986,” p.67. See also, Amaladoss, M., *Theologizing in India*, p.53; Kappen, S., “A New Approach to Theological Education,” *Theologizing in India*, p.58; Chethimattam, “Problems of an Indian Christian Theology,” *Theologizing in India*, p.199.



Gospel of John (John 15:26; 16:5-15) and to its realization in Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Samartha ignored these passages and assumes that when the Bible speaks about the Spirit, it is necessarily the Spirit of God. In other words, the relationship between the “Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Christ” is not explored.

## Conclusion

The Pneumatological paradigm represented by Stanley Samartha raises various theological issues for Indian Pentecostals who want to engage with people of other faiths. The relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit within the Church and the activity of the Spirit in the world and particularly among people of other faiths needs further reflection. For example, Samartha argues that the Spirit is working through secular and political forces. In so doing he challenges Indian Pentecostals to broaden their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit from an internal spiritual journey in terms of prayer and meditation.

Another issue is the question of discernment of the Spirit. The criteria for distinguishing between true and false spirits led Samartha to develop “fruits of the Spirit” as the “mark” of the Spirit. In this connection, the role of the Holy Spirit at work in the faith communities of other religious traditions is not resolved even within the WCC as was highlighted at the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991. The plenary presentation of the Canberra Assembly was opened by Professor Chung Hyun Kyung, a feminist theologian from South Korea, who led an exorcist dance drawing on the symbols from her shamanist ancestor tradition and invoking the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in this context, argued Chung, was identified with the shamanistic spirits in participating in the liberation of *Han* - a Korean word meaning resentment, bitterness and grief. In this discussion issues of discerning and affirming the Spirit as well as making distinction between the Holy Spirit and other spirits divided the WCC Assembly’s opinion. These questions remain a hotly debated issue and Pentecostals can no longer stay outside this debate.



Indian Pentecostal theologians need to consider the way in which Indian Christians interpret the Bible. Samartha pointed out that Western hermeneutical paradigms contain their own cultural, social and philosophical presuppositions. Indian Pentecostals no longer can be just consumers of western hermeneutical enterprise. In order for Pentecostal theology to be rooted in the Indian soil, Indian Pentecostals needs to understand the Indian hermeneutical context. This presents a challenge for Indian Pentecostals to re-examine the methodology applied to interpret the Bible in the South Asian context.

## Chapter Four

### Samuel Rayan (1920- ): Liberation as a Theological Framework for Engaging with Religious Pluralism

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine Samuel Rayan's theological engagement with religious pluralism, as an example of Indian Christians' adaptation of liberation theology to the challenge of addressing the two defining realities of much of Indian culture: the poverty of the people, and the plurality of religions. Influenced by the theological transformations in Roman Catholic theology introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Rayan was a leader among Indian Catholic theologians to explore the salvific value of religions less in terms of their doctrinal beliefs than in their potential and active participation in the struggle to liberate human society and human life from material, institutional and religious forces of oppression and de-humanization. In this connection, Rayan is examined in this chapter not only as a spokesperson for Indian theologians and for third world theologians, but as the leading voice that bridged the Second Vatican Council to the Indian context.

The chapter will examine the four themes used to develop Rayan's engagement with religious pluralism. Firstly, it will explore the contention that Rayan goes beyond the Second Vatican Council's recognition that God intends the salvation of all people to affirm religions as means of salvation to the degree that they transform themselves in the struggle against poverty and injustice. Secondly, the chapter will examine Rayan's argument that religions find their meeting point not in a-priori principles or shared beliefs, but in the praxis of the liberative struggle for liberation and justice in society. In this regard, the chapter will demonstrate how Rayan attempted to abolish the forces of Mammon, in terms of injustice and oppression through the concrete involvement with people of other religious traditions. Thirdly, we shall explore Rayan's contention that the concern for liberative justice is indeed to be found among world religions, even though it is expressed in diverse ways. In this connection, it will be argued, that Rayan

demonstrates a certain reluctance to incorporate a Christian liberative vision into the search for a common vision, on the grounds that a shared understanding of liberation must arise from within each religious tradition as it follows itself to be transformed by the praxis of liberation. Finally, the chapter will consider Rayan's understanding of the Kingdom of God as the realization of God's reign in this world, actualized in the new humanity that he finds witnessed in all religions, of which the Church is the signal and signpost.

Our examination of Rayan's theology of religious pluralism will show that it is characterized not by doctrinal discourse, but by his concentration on praxis, meaning active engagement with contextual realities and their impact on the struggle for liberation and theological reflection thereupon. This, it will be suggested in a final section of the chapter, can offer a challenging insight to Indian Pentecostal theologians in their own search for engagement with religious pluralism.

#### 4.1 Selective Review of Rayan's Writings

A preliminary survey of writings that represents the core of Rayan's theology reveals that his liberation theological approach to religious pluralism is based on his recognition that inherent in different religions are elements of liberative motifs that can be used for justice. Unlike some of his 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors whom we discussed in Chapter Two – for example, Banerjea who attempted to present Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the spiritual quest of India or Upadhyay who tried to relate the Christian faith to the philosophical traditions of India -- Rayan "has sought to understand and interpret the Christian faith in light of the religious and secular realities of India."<sup>1</sup> In this respect his theological approach to religious pluralism has more in common with that of M.M. Thomas, although we will argue that Rayan differs from Thomas in the stronger emphasis he lays upon religions as being within the plan of divine salvation, and being means of achieving the goal of realizing God's salvation in the realization of a new humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Kunnumparam, K., "Samuel Rayan: A Great Indian theologian," *Bread and Breath: Essays in honour of Samuel Rayan*, T.K. John (ed.), (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: Gujarat) 1991. See, Fern, D.W., *Profiles in Liberation: 36 portraits of third world theologians*, (Twenty-third Publications: Connecticut), 1988.

Kirsteen Kim, tutor and Mission Programme Coordinator at the United College of Ascension examined Rayan's theology through the perspective of his pneumatology, or understanding of the Holy Spirit. She observes that through his work with the Indian Theological Association (ITA) and the Ecumenical Association of Third- World Theologians (EATWOT), he became the spokesperson for Indian theologians and for third world theologians in general.<sup>2</sup> This assessment of Rayan's influence is corroborated by the book that was produced in honor of Rayan for his seventieth birthday, that included contributions from theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, James H. Cone, Kosuke Koyama, Michael Amaladoss and M.M. Thomas.<sup>3</sup> Choosing such a highly respected theologian, gives an opportunity to identify and formulate the issues liberation theology represent for Pentecostals in engaging with religious pluralism.

Rayan has published regularly in English and his native Malayalam. Of his theological work, the Latin American Liberation theologian, Gustavo Guterrez observes that "justice is not a theme alien to the contemplative life."<sup>4</sup> In other words, although Rayan is rooted deeply in the Indian Catholic tradition that emphasizes the centrality of spiritual contemplation, his thought is also characterized by the praxis of the struggle for justice. In this connection, Rayan agrees with Boff's definition of liberation theology as "the commitment to the life, cause, and struggle of these millions of debased and marginalized human beings."<sup>5</sup>

Rayan has also committed much of his writing to the issue of contextualization, in which he has sought to implement in India the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the Church being the people of God in any particular society or culture. Elemental to

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<sup>2</sup> Kim, K., *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*, (ISPCK: New Delhi), 2003, p.138.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.139. See, George, M.K., "Samuel, the Teacher," *Bread and Breath: Essays in honour of Samuel Rayan*, T.K. John (ed.), (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: Gujarat) 1991; Kunnumpuram, K., "Samuel Rayan- A Great Indian Theologian," *Bread and Breath: Essays in honour of Samuel Rayan*, T.K. John (ed.), (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: Gujarat) 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Gutierrez, G., "Theology as Wisdom," T.K. John (ed.), *Bread and Breath: Essays in Honour of Samuel Rayan SJ*. Jesuit Theological Forum Reflections 5 (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash), 1990, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Boff, L., and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Burns & Oates: Kent) 1987, p.3.

Rayan's interpretation of this teaching in the Indian context has been his affirmation of the enduring reality of other religions with which the Church needs to find new, positive relationships, and the enduring reality of poverty that the Church can only address through identification with the poor and marginalized by developing an indigenous theology of liberation.<sup>6</sup> In an article written in 1970, "Mission after Vatican II: Problems and Positions," which was part of a lecture given at the European Conference on Mission Studies in Oslo, Rayan welcomes the "new emphasis" of the Second Vatican Council which he regards as "an inward journey" to understand "afresh the mystery" of Church's mission.<sup>7</sup>

In 1975, Rayan produced his first monograph *Breath of Fire: The Holy Spirit- Heart of the Christian Gospel*, based on a 'charismatic' retreat that he led for the Maryknoll Fathers, Maryknoll, New York, in 1975.<sup>8</sup> It is a devotional study of selected Biblical passages in which he draws out a liberationist interpretation of the Biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit as a "breath of fire" that is present "not in ethereal euphoria, but in committed historical action."<sup>9</sup> This activity of the Holy Spirit starts with creation and continues to the present day. The Holy Spirit is, therefore, "the One who guides the course of history,"<sup>10</sup> in the sense of the liberator who is everywhere transforming human history into the Kingdom of God.

In 1975, Rayan wrote a seminal paper in which he laid out the theological foundation for his understanding of the Church's mission as being to actualize the liberative guidance of the Holy Spirit. This paper, prepared originally for the American Jesuit Missions Conference in St. Paul Minnesota, explores the relationship between development and evangelism within a renewed understanding of the mission of the Church: "whether and how this [i.e. development] could be counted as part of the Church's Gospel mission,

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<sup>6</sup> Ferm, D., *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1986, p.91.

<sup>7</sup> Rayan, S., "Mission after Vatican II: Problems and Positions," *International Review of Missions*, Vo.59, 1970, p.414.

<sup>8</sup> Rayan, S., *Breath of Fire: The Holy Spirit- the Heart of the Christian Gospel*, (Geoffrey Chapman, London), 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.vii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.3.

and in what manner and measure it is related to evangelization.”<sup>11</sup> He argued that development is not the fruit or an indirect form of evangelization, but identical with it. In evangelization, therefore, witnessing and development work are all part of a “single mission.”<sup>12</sup>

It has already been noted that Rayan’s theology, like that of other liberation theologians, is characterized by a praxis-oriented epistemology; we know God through the praxis of struggling to actualize God’s word in the liberation of all God’s people. In his article “Theological Priorities in India Today” Rayan states: “Indian theology seeks to discern, illumine, and support the people’s struggle for human wholeness in freedom and dignity.”<sup>13</sup> This endeavour to develop a theology that has at its heart a commitment to the struggle for freedom and justice is not exclusive to the Christian community. A contextual Indian Christian theology must, he argues, arise from within the realities of India in which every particular faith community should understand itself in relation to every other faith community that makes up the entire national community, and therefore include the “praxis of secular and religious movements as well as our own lifestyle, ideology, and alignment.”<sup>14</sup>

Combining this insight with his commitment to the liberation of the poor, Rayan takes the view that it is the responsibility of the Church’s mission to explore the other religions of India not as alien doctrinal systems, but as means through which God has been seeking to bring about human liberation. In his article “Wrestling in the Night,” he seeks to draw attention to the liberative qualities of other religions, as the basis on which he envisions their co-operation in the struggle to lead towards life and freedom.<sup>15</sup> This theme is continued in “A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context,” where Rayan highlights the Asian religious concepts in search of how each understands human

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<sup>11</sup> Rayan, S., “Evangelization and Development,” *Mission Trends No.2- Evangelization*, Gerald H. Aenderson & Thomas F. Stransky, (Paulist Press: New York), 1975, p.87.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.104.

<sup>13</sup> Rayan, S., “Theological Priorities in India Today” in *Irruption of the Third World* by Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (eds.) (New York: Orbis Books) 1983, p.30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Rayan, S., “Wrestling in the Night,” *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, R.S. Sugirtharajah, (Orbis Books: New York) 1994.

liberation, and delineates a path towards liberation that can enrich inter-religious co-operation in overcoming oppression in Asia.<sup>16</sup>

This brief review of the writings of Samuel Rayan that are considered to have the greatest relevance to the subject of this chapter shows that his theology centers around a core of inter-related themes: that the Church is the people of God in any given culture or society; that the people of God are identified not in terms of ecclesiastical institutions or doctrines, but in their commitment to the realization in history of God's Kingdom through opposition to all that obstructs it in the degrading of human life and society; that liberative values of the Kingdom can be found in all religions, and are to be discerned through the experience and perspective of the poor and oppressed; that the Church's mission lies not in its own aggrandizement, but in its radical identification with the Holy Spirit, the "fire" of God's action in history and in all religions, transforming them into means of salvation in creating a "new" humanity.

## 4.2 The influence of Rahner and the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council provided a theological starting point for Rayan in engaging with the concrete situations of people of other religions.<sup>17</sup> In this new perspective, God is seen as the origin and end of all peoples. The Council's *Declaration on the Church's Relationship with Non-Christian Religions*, more commonly known by the opening words of its Latin text as *Nostra Aetate* ("In our age"), offers a positive view of world religions and emphasized the desirability of dialogue and collaboration with them. It proved to be a water-shed document, the significance of which is recognized by the American Catholic theologian, Paul Knitter, as follows: "for the first time in the history

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<sup>16</sup> Rayan, S., "A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context," *SEDOS*, 29, 6&7, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Rayan is not the only Asian theologian who is influenced by second Vatican Council. Aloysius Pieris, Sri Lankan Catholic theologian, is also influenced by the Vatican Council II as he engages theologically with the social and religious realities of Sri Lanka. In so doing, like Rayan, Pieris' commitment to a theology of religious pluralism requires him to expand his understanding of Vatican II. Pieris believes that in a religiously plural context, all religions should be concerned with the struggle for the poor. He looks upon Vatican II as providing a new point of departure that leaves "the Catholic Church's missionary claims in cinders." In this new paradigm, the churches in Asia are called upon "to resurrect a new credible symbol of God's saving presence among our peoples, an authoritative word from a source of revelation universally recognized as such in Asia." See, Pieris, A., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh), 1988.



of the Church, a magisterial statement recognized the value and validity not just of non – Christians but of non – Christian religions.”<sup>18</sup>

The *Nostra Aetate* takes its theological starting point in the unity of humankind, premised on the Biblical affirmation that every human being is a creature of the one God, and therefore comprises “one community.”(Acts 17:26)<sup>19</sup> Religions are acknowledged as ways in which human beings search for “answers to the unresolved riddles of human existence.” As such, they “may explore the divine mysteries” and may contain “the truth that enlightens all human beings.”<sup>20</sup> The document therefore eschews all negative ways of referring to people of other religions as “pagan,” or “heathen,” or to caricaturing them as being within the grip of “idolatry” or “error.” Instead they are valued positively. Expounding on the positive values found in other religions, the document declares:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which... nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.... The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: Prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men....<sup>21</sup>

The Indian Catholic theologian, Michael Amaladoss, argues that this new approach to other religions, though slow in coming, can be seen to be based on three foundational affirmations. Firstly, that God’s salvific will is universal and extends to all humanity in ways that are unknown to the Church. Secondly, that all peoples share a common origin and a common goal in life, namely, God. Thirdly, that since human beings have a social nature, the quest for God cannot be confined simply to the interior freedom of one’s

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<sup>18</sup> Knitter, P., “Catholic Theology of Religions at a Crossroads,” *Christianity among World Religions*, Kung, H., and Moltmann, J. (eds.), (T&T Clark: Edinburgh), 1986, p.100.

<sup>19</sup> Flannery, A., *Vatican Council II- The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Fowler Wright Books Ltd.,: Worcs, England) 1975, p.738.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.739.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

conscience, but needs to find visible social expression, and that this is achieved through religions.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to recognize that this emphasis on the salvific function of religion goes back in Catholic thinking before the Second Vatican Council, especially to the thought of Karl Rahner, one of the chief architects of the Second Vatican Council's attitude towards other religions. Paul Knitter – himself a student of Karl Rahner – shows that much of the theological substance of the *Nostra Aetate* can be traced to his teacher, particularly in his understanding of God's universal salvific will.<sup>23</sup> Rahner starts with God's desire to save all humanity that is made effective through the universal gift of grace that endows all humankind. Grace, according to this view, is not an extrinsic addition to human nature but is inherently part of human nature.<sup>24</sup> The embodiment of grace in every human being makes possible their salvation as every human being strives through moral decision to live a grace-filled life.

If the operation of grace in individual lives is a well established element of Catholic theology, Rahner innovatively extended it to the field of religion. Religion, he suggests, should be understood as the socialization of grace; in which case, religions play an essential social function in the actual operation of grace as individual human beings associate with each other in striving to live a moral life. This enables Rahner to construct a positive view of other religions as "lawful," by which he means:

... an institutional religion whose 'use' by man at a certain period can be regarded as the valid as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and this for attaining salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, human response to an institutional religion is justified as a social expression of grace.

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<sup>22</sup> Amaladoss, M., op.cit., 1990, p.72-82.

<sup>23</sup> Knitter, P., *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, (Orbis Books: New York) 1985, p.125.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Rahner, K., "Christianity and the non-Christian Religions," *Christianity and other Religions*, John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), (Collins: Glasgow) 1980, p.66-67

Rahner defended his positive view of non-Christian religious traditions by studying the relationship between Biblical Israel and the other religions that surrounded it. The Old Testament narratives are God's communication to the people of Israel. Furthermore, he writes, "if we wish to be Christians, we must profess belief in the universal and serious salvific purpose of God towards all men..."<sup>26</sup> In this discussion Rahner maintains that

every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of divine, supernatural grace which offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself whether the individual takes up an attitude of acceptance or of refusal towards this grace.<sup>27</sup>

Rahner believes that the positive elements in other religions cannot be overlooked or disqualified by the negative elements. Human experience is at the heart of Rahner's theological thinking. He writes, "it would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God's grace and truth" because Rahner contends that non-Christian religions contain "supernatural grace-filled elements."<sup>28</sup>

Rahner's influence on Rayan can be seen in the latter's acceptance of religions as different human responses to grace.<sup>29</sup> Like Rahner, Rayan believes that "God works out his design of universal salvation in the secrecy of every human heart as well as through the religious and other endeavors by which men (sic) seek God."<sup>30</sup> Linking this to the Kingdom of God, Rayan argues that God's Kingdom was inaugurated with creation itself: "creation is a first grace" of God that accompanies every person and every community "enlightening and guiding, urging justice and compassion, enabling, liberating, forgiving and leading to wholeness."<sup>31</sup> Thus in Rayan's understandings,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.62.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.63.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.75.

<sup>29</sup> However for Karl Barth, religion can only be justified if it seems to be a response to Christ. See, Barth, K., "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," *Christianity and Other Religions*, Hick, J., Hebblethwaite, B., (William Collin: Glasgow), 1980.

<sup>30</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1970, p.421.

<sup>31</sup> Rayan, S., "Religions, Salvation, Mission," *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, Swidler, L., & Mojzes, P., (eds.), (The Edwin Mellor Press: Lampeter, U.K.), 1990, p.128.

other religions are sacraments of salvation. As such they are “social expressions of the kingdom” through which God’s grace is “visible.”<sup>32</sup>

Religions therefore should be valued as sacraments of salvation, or social channels of grace that each have their part to play in actualizing God’s saving plan. Rahner writes, “... the Church is not the communion of those who possess God’s grace as opposed to those who lack it.”<sup>33</sup> Rather, since God’s grace exists outside as well as within the Church, the mission of the Church is to engage other religions as allies in the up-building of the Kingdom of God on earth. In place of Rahner’s identification of non-Christian religions as “anonymous Christianity,” however, Rayan prefers to acknowledge them positively as means through which the liberative function of grace is actualized in social terms, grace providing the basis for Christian co-operation with them.

#### 4.3 Contextualizing Catholic Theology of religions in Indian Religious Realities

In light of Rayan’s evident indebtedness to the broad trend of Rahner’s theological approach to other religions, it is important to note that he (Rayan) is highly sensitive to the hegemony of Western theology in India. Theology, he insists, cannot be imported from the West or the Vatican, but must emerge from the local context in which people live. In this sense theology is personal, and cannot be produced just by sitting on “the banks of the river.” He writes:

We want a theology that will be at the service of life with its many needs and spiraling possibilities as well as its transcendence and its endlessly expanding quest and onward thrust. Our theology will be at the service of those who work, suffer, and hope, those who struggle for justice and human dignity for all women and men.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1970, p.424.

<sup>33</sup> Rahner, K., op. cit, 1980, p.79.

<sup>34</sup> Rayan, S., “Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context,” *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, V. Fabella and S. Torres (eds.) (Orbis books: New York), 1985, p.124.

In an article entitled “The Decolonization of Theology,” Rayan advocates the “decolonizing” of theology by demanding the rejection of theological imports and imitations in favor of theological reflections from within the local context.<sup>35</sup> Imported theology with the “use” of foreign language has made God “a foreigner and a stranger” in India. It was for this reason, he argues, that “colonial theology” failed to take roots in the local culture.<sup>36</sup> Without implying that Rayan regarded Rahner’s theology as in any way colonial, it is clear that he could only justify adopting it if he could, at the same time, re-cast it in terms that rooted it in Indian experience. He found the way of doing this through his active engagement with the poor.<sup>37</sup>

### 4.3.1 Theological understanding of poverty

Poverty is understood theologically by Indian Christians in two ways. The Sri Lankan liberation theologian, Aloysius Pieris, draws a distinction between “voluntary poverty and “forced poverty.”<sup>38</sup> The former is an inherent element within India’s “monastic” religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, while the latter is constitutive of the socio-economic reality of the Indian masses.<sup>39</sup> To quote his own way of distinguishing the two: “there are at least two clearly distinguishable classes of “poor”, namely, the monks who claim to have renounced all possessions and the masses who have no possessions to renounce.”<sup>40</sup> While economic poverty is seen as something negative to overcome, religious poverty or voluntary poverty is something positive to be embraced and endorsed. But the latter can only be achieved, he stresses, through solidarity with the poor and “provoking political action of behalf of those condemned to forced poverty.”<sup>41</sup> It is in this sense that we have already characterized Rayan as both a contemplative and praxiological theologian, one who recognizes that religious poverty is

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<sup>35</sup> Rayan, S., “Decolonization of Theology,” <http://www.sedos.org/english/Rayan.html>, 02-02-2003, pp.1-10.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>37</sup> Rayan, S., “Reflections on a Live-In Experience: Slumdweller,” *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, (Orbis Books: New York) 1980, pp-50-57.

<sup>38</sup> Pieris, A., “Monastic Poverty in an Asian Setting,” *Dialogue*, Vol.7, No.3, September-December 1980, p.104.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.112.

enhanced through identification with forced poverty, and is thereby empowered to play a more positive role in eradicating poverty. "Voluntary poverty," complimented by solidarity with the poor and marginalized, is "a spiritual antidote against mammon," the latter being understood as "organized greed" and "the principalities of power."<sup>42</sup> In these terms Rayan and other Indian Christian theologians have developed an indigenous Indian liberation theology, rooted in Indian contextual realities that distinguish it from their Latin American equivalents. In 1981, Rayan expressed his discomfort with the a-cultural approach of Latin American theologians, and argued for an Asian liberation theology that engages the two South Asian realities of forced poverty and religious pluralism:

Our [Indian] own search for a theology must take into account all other searches and movements for liberation. This we do in conversation with historically relevant reinterpretations and fresh insights of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian theologies while safeguarding the uniqueness of each.<sup>43</sup>

If Latin American liberation theology found in Marxist analysis a means of re-constructing Christian faith from the form in which it was first imposed by the Spanish and Portuguese *conquistadores*, South Asian liberation theology looked to other Asian religions as the framework in which to re-cast an indigenous understanding of the Gospel, distinct from colonial legacy of both medieval Catholicism and 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism. While the recognition of economic and political realities in the struggle for liberation is a contribution of Latin American theology, Indian liberation theology needs to carry these insights into the Christian encounter with Indian religions. In this quest, other religions are included as theological resources. As Kim observes: "Rayan recognized early on that an Asian theology of liberation must take cognizance of not only poverty but also the religions of Asia, and therefore be expressed in Asian religious and spiritual terms."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit. 1985, p.129.

<sup>43</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1983, p.31.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, K., op.cit., 2003, p.138-194.

Reflecting on the development project of Christians, Rayan addresses the relationship between evangelism and development. Rayan acknowledges the concept of evangelism conjures preaching the Gospel with the aim of bringing people to an explicit faith in Jesus Christ and activities of relief and development programs serve as “a means of approach.”<sup>45</sup> This view according to Rayan is based on a simple distinction of the religious and the profane.

However Rayan argues that working towards a better future on earth is part of the “fulfillment of the commandment of love.” As a matter of fact, Rayan believes that the earthly ministry of Jesus can be seen in terms of “the language of liberation and development.” Therefore, for Rayan, to evangelize “has to do... with the creation and revelation of the new brotherhood and sisterhood of Jesus’ dream, with its realization and expression at all levels of life, including the economic and the political.”<sup>46</sup> In this “unity of God’s plan, ... the task of witnessing, humanizing, preaching and loving make a single mission.”<sup>47</sup>

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that Rayan adapted Rahner’s theology of religion to Indian realities by re-thinking it in terms of liberation theology, his indigenous insight being that grace is activated in Indian religions through their contemplative traditions of “voluntary poverty.” At the same time he contributed to the re-thinking of liberation theology by re-expressing it in terms of identification with the “forced poverty” of the Indian masses, for whom religion continues to provide a means for human liberation.

#### 4.3.2 Caste and liberation

The acceptance of religion and religions as inalienable elements of contextual Indian theology does not necessitate an abdication of criticism of religion. In this sense, it is important to recognize that Rayan addresses the issue of caste as a reality of Hinduism that needs to be challenged. The Indian quest for human liberation cannot be expressed

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<sup>45</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1975, p.95.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.104.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



exclusively in terms of the struggle against economic and political oppression, but must at the same time seek to free Indians from the social chains of the caste system.<sup>48</sup> This is a case of direct linkage between religion and economics. The caste issue is, in Rayan's words, "a pressing concern" because it forces people from lower caste origin into oppressive poverty.<sup>49</sup>

In challenging the existing social order of India, Rayan points out that Jesus identified himself with the *dalit*, or outcaste, in his own society, and therefore calls on Indian Christians to "be cleansed of caste mentality."<sup>50</sup> He emphasizes that Jesus did not live for the *dalit*, rather as a *dalit*. "Dalitness" is therefore a central spectrum through which the Gospel must be interpreted in India, in solidarity with the marginalized and the despised who more truly personify the presence of Christ in India than any caste in Hindu society.

Rayan, it must be acknowledged, is not *dalit* in terms of his own biography, nor does he ever claim to be. By privileging them in terms of the indigenization of the Gospel in India, he is making a conscious choice. As an Indian theologian he lays upon himself the task of re-thinking the Gospel in "solidarity with the downtrodden" and "in choosing to be identified" with the people of lower caste origin.<sup>51</sup> This is his choice in making the good news of the Gospel relevant to the poor, and bringing freedom to the oppressed. In this regard he is also making a choice that puts him against others: against the caste tradition of Hinduism with its foundations in vast scriptural traditions of Indian religion; against the Indian Orthodox Christian community that, as we discussed in Chapter One, adopted and adapted to the Hindu caste system; against De Nobili's missionary attempt to interpret the Christian faith through the adaptations of Hindu social customs, including the caste system, with the implication that one can become a Hindu Christian while retaining one's caste identity.

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<sup>48</sup> Rayan, S., "Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult," *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to human liberation*, Felix Wilfred (ed.), (Orbis Books: New York) 1992, p.128-133. See Rayan, S., "Review of S. Samatha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*," *International Review of Mission*, 66/262, 1977, p.188.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.142.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.143.

Rayan has therefore always been critical of dialogue with Brahmanic traditions on a doctrinal or a mystical level. While admitting that *Advaita* is an important strand of Indian philosophical system and that “there is an advaitic quality to most Indian thought and life,” he argues that it has only a “small” group of followers, drawn from a social and intellectual elite. He is therefore impatient of the Indian Christian attraction to using the *Vedanta* as a means of interpreting the Gospel in indigenously Indian terms. His own theology makes no constructive use of Upadhyay, nor of the writings of his Catholic contemporaries such as Sara Grant and Sr. Vandana.<sup>52</sup> Neither does he show any sensitivity to the arguments of theologians like Stanley Samartha (see Chapter Three) or K.P. Aleaz who see a convergence between certain elements of the Brahminic tradition and Dalit theology. No accommodation is possible, he argues, and a choice must be made. To indigenize the Gospel means standing with Jesus as a *dalit*, and with the *dalits* interpreting the Gospel through Indian eyes.

### 4.3.3 Poor defined in term of economics rather than religious affiliation

At the heart of Rayan’s theology is the understanding that God works through the poor people. The poor exist within every religion, and as the people through whom God’s action is most decisively effective, they must be validated as theologically significant in themselves, rather than being divided among and obscured by divisive religious definitions. He writes:

The concern of the Church is not Christians but the poor; its struggle is not for itself but for the liberation of all men and women who are held captive.... The task of the Church is to champion a whole new social order.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Grant, S., “Reflections on the Mystery of Christ suggested by a Study of Sankara’s concept of Relation,” Gispert- Sauch, G., (ed.) *God’s Word among Men*, (Vidyajyoti: Delhi), 1973, pp.105-116; Grant, S., “Christian Theologizing and the Challenge of Advaita,” Gisper-Sauch, G., Amaladoss, M., John, T.K. (eds.), *Theologizing in India*, (Theological Publications in India: Bangalore), 1981, pp.70-80; Grant, S., *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a non-dualist Christian*, (Asian Publishing House: Bangalore), 1991; Also see Vandana “Reflections of a Christian on the Upanishads,” Amalorpavadass, D.S., *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, (NBCL: Bangalore), 1974, pp.237-259.

<sup>53</sup> Rayan, S., “The Justice of God,” *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, Deane William Fearn (ed), (Orbis Books: New York), 1979, p.354.

This is illustrated by the narrative of the Good Samaritan (Mat. 25:31-46), the meaning of which he interprets as a concern for the “neediest, irrespective of religious affiliation.”<sup>54</sup> While in no sense ignoring religion, Rayan sees the poor within all religions as God’s option for being present within all religions, uniting those in whom God’s action is most dynamically embodied – i.e. the poor – across the divisions of institutional religion. Here Rayan most evidently moves away from Rahner’s undifferentiated concept of the presence of grace on the one hand, and from the secularized approach to Latin American liberation theology on the other. He takes seriously the cultural and non-Christian religious realities of the task of liberation in the Indian context. The critical reflection from within the religious pluralism of India cannot transcend particular faith communities in the search for a national identity, except that it first integrates the experience of the poor across all religions, and develops a theology of religious pluralism from their perspective.

As the locus of God’s salvific action, the poor in each religion experience the solidarity of forced poverty that unites them across the boundaries of institutional religions. Those within each religion who are committed to “voluntary poverty,” and live in solidarity with the poor of “forced poverty” are empowered to develop a theological critique of all that impoverishes and de-humanises the oppressed, including the role of religion in such oppression; and to engage in such criticism without any apologetic intent to defend their own religion while impugning the evil in others. The Gospel is the criterion by which Christian theologians engage this task, but their interpretation of the Gospel is now transformed by the insights of the poor in all religions as they stand in solidarity with them.

How, then, does Rayan apply this approach to his critique of the Indian Church? His answer was given in his comment on the findings of the Theological Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences that met in Thailand, April 1996. He was in full agreement with its diagnosis of the condition of suffering that afflicts the masses of

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<sup>54</sup>Rayan, S., op. cit, 1985, p.140.

Asian peoples, whose poverty is caused by colonialism, globalization, systematic exclusion, extinction of indigenous groups, marginalization of people's language and culture, and certain processes of modernization and loss of heritage.<sup>55</sup> He agreed also with the Conference's condemnation of continuing oppression of these forces upon the will and confidence of the people in India, disempowering them as participants in the struggle to build the Kingdom of God.<sup>56</sup>

As regarding the Indian Church, he identified four problems that undermine its response to this situation, and offered a solution to each. Firstly he called for an end of Christian dualism, by which he meant the Church's tendency of prioritize its mission in terms of the "spiritual and religious", and to regard the imperative of social justice to "lie outside the scope of the Church."<sup>57</sup> He argued instead for a holistic approach to mission in which the witness to the Kingdom of God addresses the concrete realities of everyday existence. Secondly, he criticized the Christian tendency to explain the social and economic problems in Asia as being "the result of a divine disposition," arguing that this arises from a sense of fatalism and resignation that undermines active engagement with the world.<sup>58</sup> Thirdly, the Church is guilty of uncritically accepting western notions of development that satisfy the liberal conscience but fail to redress the real causes of poverty. Short of rejecting development as a concept, Rayan argued that the Church needs to go beyond simply providing emergency provisions, and to re-interpret development in terms of liberating the poor from systemic systems of oppression, with uncompromising insistence on justice and human rights.<sup>59</sup> Lastly, he is critical of the Church's confidence that the way to human liberation lies along the path of technological modernization that promises to overcome the "backwardness" of different sectors of society. Technology is insufficient to eradicate human problems. What is needed, rather, is a holistic understanding of liberation that draws from India's traditions

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<sup>55</sup> Rayan, S., "Local Cultures- Instruments of Incarnated Christian Spirituality," *SEDOS*, 29/6-7, 1997, p.209.

<sup>56</sup> Rayan, S., "Asia and Justice," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 50/7 August 1986, p.352.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 354.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.357-358.

of “voluntary poverty”, and challenges the structure and institution of the economy and society, including religions, that are responsible for the continuing poverty and suffering of the Asia poor.<sup>60</sup>

#### 4.4 Religions as vehicles of liberation

Since the majority of the poor are people from all religious faiths, Rayan wants different liberative elements that are found in all these religions working together to fight against oppression. For Rayan religions meet not on the basis of an a priori universal in ethics or philosophy, but in human struggle for liberation and justice in society. For Rayan, inspiration for struggle and humanization can originate in any religious heritage. He writes:

There is a growing perception that Hinduism without caste is as possible and desirable as Christianity without hierarchy, even if what emerges in the process will be different from the Hinduism and the Christianity we have known, provided they are in touch with the people whom God loves and liberates. There are attempts to go to the roots and origins of religious heritage to draw inspiration for the struggle for the humanization of our history.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, these sources may be Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, and they are not in conflict as long as they are for “human wholeness.”<sup>62</sup> This, however, raises the question, where are the empirical evidences that indicate world religions as vehicles of liberation rather than perpetrators of oppression? Latin American liberation theologians struggled against established religion - Christianity. They recognized the alternative of base ecclesial communities as essential. In the Indian context, many theologians opted to find liberative elements within different religious traditions despite their failure to bring about liberation rather than to seek an alternative community.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1983, p.35

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Rayan argues that Hinduism like all religions has “prophetic” and ‘alienating” elements. He believes that the sacred writings of the other Asian religions have guided, nourished and sustained hope in a hopeless world,<sup>63</sup> i.e. the story of *Ramayana*, one of the two great epics of India, which has been re-interpreted to serve as a platform to champion the cause of women’s liberation and the conscientization of villagers and peasants. *Ramayana* is the story of the exile of prince Rama and his wife *Sita*, the abduction of *Sita* by king *Ravana*, and her rescue by Rama who kills *Ravana* in battle with help of devoted tribes. Rayan observes that in the past, this narrative was used to inculcate womanly obedience, wifely fidelity, and feminine patience. However, in recent times the character of *Sita* has been reinterpreted

As that of a woman with a will of her own, who registers firm and well-argued protests against the ways and values of her husband, subjects him to searching criticism, and condemns his ambiguous attitude to court intrigue, to which both of them had fallen victims.<sup>64</sup>

In “Wrestling in the Night,” Rayan mixes religious narratives from three different faith communities: Christian, Hindu and Muslim.<sup>65</sup> The three religious narratives are Job from the Old Testament, the story of *Arjuna* from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and poems of *Gitanjali*<sup>66</sup>. All three works, Rayan writes, “represent our pursuit of God and God’s pursuit of us through the tangled web of our painful, conflict-ridden, historical existence.”<sup>67</sup> Examining the common themes such as suffering and God’s concern for people, Rayan concludes these texts “become God’s word addressed to us and our community here and now, judging and gracing us, and challenging us to be creative and free for one another.”<sup>68</sup> However, having introduced poems from the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to argue that one can find inspiration to struggle for liberation<sup>69</sup> there is no attempt

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<sup>63</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1985, p.132.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.134.

<sup>65</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1994.

<sup>66</sup> *Poems of Gitanjali* is written by a schoolgirl who died of cancer soon after her sixteenth birthday. See Nandy, P., *Poems of Gitanjali*, (Oriel Press: London), 1982.

<sup>67</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1994, p.110.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.111.

<sup>69</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1997, p.135.



to reconcile his notion of liberation with the *Bhagavad Gita*'s endorsement of caste.<sup>70</sup> This is simply ignored.

The link that connects all religion and provides a basis for their coming together is the struggle for social liberation. The basis for co-operation cannot be how religions meet in Christ, as in the fulfilment theology of *Nostra Aetate* which affirms that in Christ there is a fulfillment of all human aspiration for salvation. Real co-operation between people of different faiths occurs when there is an engagement with promoting social welfare and liberation with and for the plight of the poor. This provides in Rayan's view a common struggle for justice in which religions actively compliment each other, rather than struggling against each other.

#### 4.5 Liberation as universal but with local variance

In Rayan's understanding, in a pluralistic society different religions should work together to eradicate injustice, oppression, exploitation, discrimination, corruption, underdevelopment of communities and exclusive concentration of wealth and labour together for "proper democratic distribution or re-distribution of powers and hence of productive wealth."<sup>71</sup> But this raises the question of whether the concept of "social justice" universal, or do religions have different ideas of social justice, just as they have different doctrines?

From this liberation perspective, the search for liberative justice is common among prophetic elements of all religions, while their expressions of liberative justice remain diverse. Therefore, different religious traditions ought to be concerned with the issues of social justice because every religion has an inherent responsibility to respond in their different ways to the plight of the poor. Rayan recognizes that the concept of "social justice" is expressed differently in different religions. As a result, the language to describe different religious experience varies. However, what all religions have in common, despite their differences is their commitment to social justice.

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<sup>70</sup> Bhagavad Gita 18, 41, 71.

<sup>71</sup> Rayan, S., op.cit., 1992, p.92.



For Rayan, liberation cannot take place without dialogue with other religions. He is aware of the complex inter-relation between socio-economic situations and religious-cultural perspectives mutually influencing each other. Therefore in order to provide a new framework involves dialoging with other religions. The hope then is that other religions will also become allies and a source of inspiration. For Rayan, inter-religious dialogue must involve collaboration for justice.

In the struggle for liberation, Rayan goes beyond endorsing his own religious traditions as the only source of a social vision. Instead, he promotes a social vision that can be shared by people belonging to other religious traditions. In this context, Rayan goes beyond theologians such as M.M. Thomas who assumes that the social vision of his own religion, Christianity, can be shared by people belonging to other religious traditions.<sup>72</sup> Rayan wants to recognize that each religious tradition has inherent “social vision” that can promote liberation. Therefore, no one tradition has monopoly over the other. The challenge then for Rayan is to discover how different religious traditions themselves collaborate in the promotion of that vision and those values.

## 4.6 Liberation and the Holy Spirit

In *Breath of Fire: The Holy Spirit- Heart of the Christian Gospel*, Rayan portrays the Holy Spirit as breaking into history. He traces the activity of the Spirit back to the creation of the world in hovering of the Spirit over the waters and turning chaos into order. He also identifies the annunciation of the Angel to Mary as the “second creation.” In understanding the ministry of Jesus in the context of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, Rayan sees the Spirit as a liberator. In this understanding, the Spirit acts as creator. Thus Rayan associates all “great beginnings” and liberating movements to the “creator Spirit.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Thomas, M.M., *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, (CLS: Madras), 1970.

<sup>73</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit. 1979, pp.3-9.

For Rayan, the Spirit also stirs people for action. So Rayan discerns the Spirit in history at work in movements of liberation of the poor and oppressed. This social / ethical criterion helps Rayan to recognize the transforming Spirit in other religious traditions. In this connection, Rayan has no difficulty affirming that the Spirit is leading people like Gandhi in the struggle towards liberation.

One of the important symbols of God for Rayan is the pre- Aryan *shakti* tradition.<sup>74</sup> He particularly draws attention to the image of *shakti* in interpreting the Spirit in India. Rayan argues that the *shakti* tradition is “far less prestigious than advaita, less known than bhakti, but somehow implicit in most Indian experiences.” In so doing, he challenges not only the hegemony of the upper caste tradition but also the Brahminic expressions of Christian theology.

Rayan also shows openness to India’s popular religions in the fight against injustice and oppression. Rayan defines popular religion as a theology that “grow[s] out of local population, out of their life and life’s struggles ... and emerge as part of people’s response to situation of oppression, deprivation and dehumanization.”<sup>75</sup> In this regard he writes the conception of human nature and its relationship to physical nature found in the popular religions can be a basis to build a better future.<sup>76</sup>

## 4.7 Mission of the Church

In an article written in 1970, “Mission after Vatican II: Problems and Positions,”<sup>77</sup> Rayan argues the Church’s mission had to be re-evaluated after a greater openness toward other religions that was voiced in the Vatican document. Rayan writes, “the council does not say that these religions are ways of salvation; it only affirms that they stand within God’s universal plan of salvation and are under his grace.”<sup>78</sup> This view has led the Church to recognize that

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<sup>74</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1977, p.189.

<sup>75</sup> Rayan, S., “The ‘How’ of Third World Theologies,” *Third World Theologies in Dialogue: Essays in Memory of D.S.Amalorpavadass*, Chandran, J.R., (ed.), (EATWOT: Bangalore), 1991, p.44.

<sup>76</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1983, p.33.

<sup>77</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1970, p.414-426.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.422.

God makes his salvation possible and available in some way to all men everywhere throughout history. And within all nations, cultures and religions there is a secret and saving presence of God, a sowing of his word and a movement of the Spirit.<sup>79</sup>

According to Rayan, there is a “crisis” in mission and outlines three fundamental principles in re-interpreting the concept of mission of the Church. Firstly, Rayan argues that to the great disappointment and surprise of missionaries there is a resurgence of local religions. Instead of dying out local religions are becoming more influential and growing. Secondly, the love Asian Christians has developed, particularly after the Second Vatican Council for the religions of their land. Thirdly, the end of the imperial era is seen as a new day for re-interpreting and developing a theology that is rooted in the reality of the local situations.<sup>80</sup>

Rayan argues, no culture, no race, no language, no age or system can fully comprehend or realize all human potentials and life’s promises. Therefore, every culture has something to learn from other cultures and something to offer to them as well. This leads Rayan to make the next logical proposition that since there is no culture that is superior to another, God communicates to all people in all places in different “sounds and symbols.” Consequently religious faiths are partial and imperfect in revealing the nature of God.<sup>81</sup>

Thus the mission of the Church is to promote achievements found in all cultures and religions toward life promoting and liberation. Rayan writes:

The achievements of each tradition, its symbols, saints, scriptures, art and insights belong to all to the extent they are life-promoting and liberating. They must be respectfully sought, offered, received, assimilated, integrated and lived for the benefit of the human family and its earth-home.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.416.

<sup>80</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit, 1970, p.418.

<sup>81</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1997, p.97.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Mission then is to discern God's presence among the people and to sense what God has been doing in the past and continuing to do. Evangelization becomes more than just verbal proclamation. Rayan interprets Luke 4: 18-19 as mission addressing exclusively towards the poor, oppressed and the hopeless.<sup>83</sup> The mission, therefore, is to witness to these people "the glad tiding," that they have rights, dignity, that God wishes everyone the possibility and the hope of a fuller, more human life and that God is present and active with them in their struggle against injustice.<sup>84</sup> In this context, other religions have inherent value as opposed to acquiring "revelatory" values when but only when it is read in light of Jesus Christ.

Jesus takes oppression upon himself to set people free. To follow Jesus Christ in the modern world is to serve Christ who is calling human beings to be in the side of the poor and the oppressed. Rayan writes:

The only adequate response to God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ is to make our own God's concern for people and to give all we have for their total liberation and wholeness as God gave the Son for the world's salvation.<sup>85</sup>

To interpret Christ today "has to be existential, responding to actual, live situations."<sup>86</sup> Thus, Rayan wants to abandon terms such as "uniqueness" and "absoluteness" as traditionally applied to Jesus Christ.

In 1988, Rayan re-visited the issue of mission and salvation in his response to Cardinal Jozef Tomko of the *Catholic Church's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, who challenged the content of mission in the emerging theology of religions. Tomko showed concern over the "relativization of the historical Jesus" and "redefinition" of mission as "the transformation of the world in justice and human promotion."<sup>87</sup> Rayan replied by suggesting that since God wills everyone to be saved, the "possibility and

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<sup>83</sup> Rayan, S., op.cit., 1979, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Rayan, S., op.cit., 1986, p.349.

<sup>86</sup> Rayan, S., "Interpreting Christ to India: Contributions of Roman Catholic Theological Seminaries," *Indian Journal of Theology*, 23/4, 1974, p.230.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.126-127.

offer” of salvation must be available to the people from every nation from the time of creation. So for Rayan, “salvation is a larger divine project” and to interpret salvation only through the life and death of Christ is “too narrow for biblical perspectives, and too inept for a Spirit-led history of over two million years.”<sup>88</sup>

#### 4.8 The kingdom of God as God’s project in history

The kingdom of God paradigm helps Rayan to recognize the role of other religions as part of God’s project in history. Rayan identifies the kingdom of God with creation. According to Rayan, the kingdom of God is inaugurated with creation rather than initiated by Christ. The kingdom of God, therefore, is not geographical or Church-centered. The goal is to make kingdom of God a reality here in this world rather than a mere profession of God as King. In this process, the Church is called to serve faithfully its mission while recognizing that it does not exhaust or monopolize the revelation of God. Other religions have an important role to play in the task of liberation. In this struggle Christianity will share with, and learn from other religions.

The primacy of justice and the need for social change is also rooted in the understanding of the kingdom of God. According to Rayan, the justice of God is reflected in the faithfulness and provision for every creature that ever came into existence. So “the fidelity of God is the justice of the kingdom for which we are to strive and hunger and thirst.”<sup>89</sup> He refers to Biblical passages such as liberation of slaves from Egypt, freedom and fellowship for outcasts and sinners in the ministry of Jesus to show the “concrete and contextual nature of the justice of God. Thus, through social analysis, teaching and praxis, the Church in India must fight in order to fulfill the “historical realization of God’s fidelity- justice.”<sup>90</sup> In other words, just as God was active in the incarnation of Christ, Christians ought to be active in the kingdom of God that is inaugurated with creation.

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<sup>88</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1990, p.136.

<sup>89</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit. 1987, p.11.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

According to Rayan, the universality of the reign of God is understood to be present wherever the liberating values are found and lived. In this connection, Rayan agrees with the conclusion of a theological consultation, "Evangelization in Asia," organized by the office for Evangelization of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, held in Hua Hin, Thailand in 1991. The conclusion of the consultation was that:

The kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent Divine Mystery which impinges upon them, and go out of themselves in love and service of fellow humans, there the Reign of God is at work.<sup>91</sup>

For Rayan the kingdom of God is not a general or an abstract idea.<sup>92</sup> However, the question for Rayan is whether non-Christian religions are preparations for the kingdom of God? Or is the kingdom of God somehow already present in all religions? People of other faiths are not only already in the Kingdom but are also promoting the same kingdom through their faith commitments. In this view, God is understood to be leading everything and everyone to the final consummation to which all are summoned. In this perspective, different religions provide a common spiritual foundation to a common commitment to the task of liberation. The task therefore is to work as partners in building this kingdom. In this task, social justice concerns provide a common basis for inter-religious understanding. People of other faiths responding to their religious traditions become participants in the Kingdom.

This does not mean that every aspect of a religious tradition is endorsed as truth which God disclosed. Rayan recognizes that while religious traditions are a response to God, they are mixed with false opinions and errors, which have been brought about by the social and personal contexts in which they exist. For Rayan, Christianity is not excluded from sharing these characteristics with other religions. The justice of God, for Rayan, is to overcome all human oppression.<sup>93</sup> Jesus campaigned to encourage people to actualize their full potential and to seek freedom from ritual morality and religion. As a result, the

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<sup>91</sup> Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference Papers, no.64, (FABC: Hong Kong), 1992, p.31.

<sup>92</sup> Rayan, S., "the Kingdom of God: Blueprint for a New Society," [www.geocities.com/orthopapism/samrayan.html](http://www.geocities.com/orthopapism/samrayan.html), p.2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Church has an important role in the plight of the poor. For Rayan, the Church is called to struggle for justice. In this struggle for the change of unjust socio-economic, political and religious structures, the Church is seen as being in the service of God's mission in the world. The focus is no longer on converting people to Christianity but building up of the Kingdom of God in which task the Church serves as agent of liberation. The kingdom is not just in the future but is here in our midst. Even though this kingdom is not of this world it begins in this world.

The primary mission of the Church is to build up the 'reign of God' through collaboration with peoples of different religious communities. Therefore in this process of building a new humanity, other religions are all equal and co-workers offering different religious dimensions to humanity's quest for a holistic life. In other words, the kingdom of God means the total liberation of all people which begins in this world.

Rayan is not satisfied in asserting an ontological understanding of the presence of the kingdom of God in other religions, but insists that this is activated wherever religions fight for the poor and against poverty. In this connection, Rayan does not make a distinction between the kingdom of God in world religions and the Church. For him, it is the same while the Church is a servant in the kingdom of God, it does not have any privileged position. Non-Christian religions are already within the reign of God and as such participate in the values of the kingdom. In other words, other religious traditions are not scattered and random rays of light but genuine religious expressions of God.

This raises another question, namely, how does Rayan defend his approach from the criticism of being a works-based theology that ignores the "given" character of the kingdom of God? As an Indian Catholic theologian, Rayan believes, it is imperative that we follow in the foot- steps of Jesus Christ in solidarity with the poor working out a gospel of liberation. He writes:

Jesus chose to be a outcast not to approve the system, not to legitimate *varna*, not to give it any divine sanction. Quite the contrary. Jesus became one with the outcasts in order to awaken them to the fact that he was challenging the system...to show how God was with them, ... to summon them to stand together on the basis of their shared suffering in



order to say a clear no to oppression, and stand as a sign of the liberation God wills for the people.<sup>94</sup>

In other words, it is through participation in the struggle through which the kingdom of God “becomes.”<sup>95</sup> In Rayan’s understanding the “given” nature of the kingdom of God is to be identified with the poor, and in that the coming kingdom is discerned. In so doing Christians could join other believers in celebrating the kingdom of God.

#### 4.9 A critical appraisal of the theology of Samuel Rayan

In his attempt to establish a post Vatican II view of religious pluralism, Rayan moves further from Rahner in regarding religions as within the goal of salvation in the sense and to the degree religions function as forces which liberate the poor and de-construct the social, cultural and economic powers that inflict people with poverty. This theology sees preferential option for the poor; Jesus as identified poor; and the Holy Spirit as the universalizing liberative power of God.

Despite his understanding of participating in the kingdom of God in ending poverty, Rayan’s work is not representative of a dalit theology. Rayan identifies with poverty in an ideological way rather than being truly experiential. In this connection, the notion of Dalit is idealized and the issue of poverty is taken as *a priori*.

While the distinctive liberationist understanding of the Holy Spirit as a liberator who works in history is helpful, the manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which testify to apostolic power are ignored. For Rayan “powers” and “spirits” are the social structures against which liberation is to be waged. In this regard, Rayan’s criteria for discerning the mission of the Spirit are socio-economic.

While Rayan’s use of the symbol of *shakti* against the hegemony of high caste and elite theology is remarkable, he does invite the criticism of not seriously engaging with the

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<sup>94</sup> Rayan, S., “Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult,” *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Liberation*, Felix Wilfred (ed), (Orbis Books: New York) 1992, p.134.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

religiosity of the poor. In the cosmology of the people of lower castes there is an understanding of many spirits. Rayan fails to recognize this cosmological world-view in favor of recognizing one universal Spirit.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown through Rayan's liberationist approaches to religious pluralism that the search for liberative justice is common among people of different faiths, while their expressions of liberative justice remain diverse. This liberationist approach to religious pluralism raises number of issues Pentecostals need to engage in developing an approach to religious pluralism.

Rayan's theology, which originated as faith, confronted the injustice of the poor challenge Pentecostals to articulate their faith within their social context. The justice of God is for the whole humanity, not just to those who are within the institutional Church. Despite having majority of membership from the Dalit community, there is no appetite to join in the political struggle or combat caste oppression. The emphasis among the Pentecostal community has been on "the liberation of the individual."<sup>96</sup> Rayan's theology challenges Pentecostals to develop a Pentecostal liberation theology that would broaden the experience of "individual liberation" to include the struggle against unjust structures.<sup>97</sup>

Rayan's theological approach also challenges Pentecostals to broaden their theological understanding to view the kingdom of God as God's project in history. Injustice and unjust structures hinder the historical realization of God's justice. In this understanding, human beings are active agents in the fight against oppression and injustice because it disrupts God's purposes in this world. Since God's justice is contextual, Pentecostals need to reflect on the relationship between the Kingdom of God and nation building and human history. Pentecostals also need to take seriously the concern of the "here and

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<sup>96</sup> Abraham, K. C., "Pentecostal Liberation Theology," *Faith and Witness: Essays in Honour of Rev. Dr. T. G. Koshy*, Stephen, M., (ed.), (FTS Publications: Manakala, Kerala), 2003, p.63.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

now” on this earth, specifically, the faith in Christ relating to social action, political conflict and economic development.<sup>98</sup>

Rayan’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the liberator to create and stir people for action towards liberation regardless of religious distinctiveness provides a basis for Pentecostals to widen their perspective on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. The challenge therefore is not whether the Holy Spirit is active outside the Church but where one encounters the Spirit. Rayan challenges Pentecostals to recognize the movement of the Spirit in prophetic and liberating movements of all human history.

When the majority of Indian Christians talk about “powers” and “spirits” it is in terms of the supernatural. The religious experience of the people of lower caste origin is dominated by fear of malevolent spirits and other forms of oppression, including poverty. Despite Rayan’s recognition of popular religions of the Dalits, he set aside these religious values in favour of endorsing a particular view of Hinduism or Buddhism that seems to be all encompassing. Forsaking their theological tradition is a challenge for Pentecostals to avoid that mistake and explore the spiritual significance of traditional practices.

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<sup>98</sup> Rayan, S., op. cit., 1975, p.91.

## Chapter Five

### Wesley Ariarajah: Theo-Centric Model as a Theological Framework for Engaging with Religious Pluralism

#### Introduction

As an example of the theo-centric model as an approach of religious pluralism, this chapter will examine the theological work of Wesley Ariarajah to identify and formulate the issues the theo-centric model presents for Pentecostals in engaging with religious pluralism. In Ariarajah's view, it is God not Jesus Christ who is at the centre of the Christian faith. In other words, the primary focus is on God rather than Christ. In this connection, in *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, Coward points out that the theo-centric approach "ignores" the divinity of Christ but recognises "the greatness and freedom of God."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Coward concludes that shifting the centre from Christ to God "opens the way for dialogue" with people of other faiths.<sup>2</sup> Ariarajah believes a theo-centric approach has great potential for engaging with people of other faiths and has tirelessly urged the Christian Church to adopt this approach. He argues that a shift from a "Christo-centric starting point to a theo-centric one" would enable the Church to engage more adequately with people of other faiths.<sup>3</sup>

Influenced by his in-depth study of religions as well as twentieth century thought of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ariarajah's approach towards an Asian Christian theology of religions is his belief that world religions are different human responses to the one divine reality. The Christ-centred view of other religions is based on the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God. As such, Christ is the universal revelation and mediation for all human beings. However, Ariarajah wants to affirm not only that there are elements of truth in other religions, but also that these are sufficient for salvation. In particular, Ariarajah embraces a Christology that

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<sup>1</sup> Coward, H., *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1985; See Robinson, A.T., *Truth is Two-Eyed*, (SCM Press: London), 1979, p.129.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>3</sup> Ariarajah, W., "Church must shift to meet new mission needs," *GBGM News Archives*, <http://gbgm-umc.org/mission/news/gb98f6.html>, p.2.

understands the self-disclosure of God is not only through the person of Jesus Christ, but to all human beings in whatever circumstances of place and time. This shift from the dogma that Christ is at the centre of the Christian faith to the realisation that it is God who is at the centre has implication for Ariarajah's understanding of salvation, Bible, inter – religious dialogue and mission. This chapter will now seek to explore these issues.

## 5.1 Selected Theological Review of Ariarajah's Writings

The writings of Ariarajah introduced in this section represent the core of his theology, which will be considered in this chapter. In order to understand Ariarajah's theology one must start from the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka. His immediate social context in Sri Lanka which is over eighty-five percent Buddhists and Hindus challenged Ariarajah to develop a theology that will engage with these religious realities from within their own context. He writes:

Thus religious plurality challenged my faith as presented within my religious tradition. My religion was not able or was unwilling to take the religious life of my neighbours seriously. At times it trampled on that faith; often it misrepresented it; always it refused to face its challenge. I felt that my faith was too narrow, my God- too small, and my life with my neighbours distorted and diminished by the outright and unjust refusal to take their religious life seriously.<sup>4</sup>

In 1985, Ariarajah published a seminal work *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, which he wrote in response to a request from the Asia-Pacific Region of the World Student Christian Federation for a book on dialogue that would help Christians living in a religiously plural situation. As a Methodist minister, he is aware of the fact that for the Indian Church, particularly, from the Protestant tradition, the primary source of authority is scripture. Consequently, the primary purpose of this book is to address the question of dialogue with persons of other faiths from within the Bible itself. In so doing, Ariarajah hopes to “kindle a desire in many to re-read the Bible in a new way...”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ariarajah, W., “What difference does Religious Plurality Make?,” <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd34-02.html>, 2000, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Ariarajah, W., *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, (WCC: Geneva), 1985, p.xiv.

*Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Thought* is a historical account of the evolution of the debate in engaging with other faiths. Ariarajah starts with the 1910 meeting of the International Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh and points out that Commission I, "Carrying the Gospel to All in the Non-Christian World", and Commission IV, "Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions" provided the early framework for the dialogical engagement with other faiths. According to Ariarajah the religious reality of India, the social and religious structure of Hinduism and lack of "numerical" growth led many missionaries to closely study Hinduism.<sup>6</sup> There was a consensus at the Conference that there needs to be a "sympathetic attitude" towards people of other faiths while maintaining Christ would "meet" the religious longings of the people of India.<sup>7</sup> In 1928 at Jerusalem, the revival, reformation within Hinduism and nationalism led to the recognition that the Church is willing to cooperate with people of other faiths against the "common enemy" while maintaining the uniqueness of the Christian message and witness.<sup>8</sup>

The continuing questions about Christian faith and other religions provided the context for the third missionary conference of the International Missionary Council, in Tambaram, in 1938. One of the central questions addressed at Tambaram was whether God's revelation in Christ is continuous or discontinuous with the religious traditions of other religions. One of the leading thinkers at Tambaram was the Dutch scholar Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965), a former missionary to Java who had recently been appointed professor of the history of religions at the University of Leiden. He was requested to prepare a special volume for the conference in which he would "state the fundamental positions of the Christian church as a witness-bearing body in the modern world," relating this specifically to "the attitude to be taken by Christians towards other faiths."<sup>9</sup> The central thesis in Kraemer's approach was the acceptance of the revealing and saving acts of God in Jesus Christ and his emphasis on a radical discontinuity between what he

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<sup>6</sup> Ariarajah, W., *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Michigan), 1991, pp.165-166.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp.28-30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kraemer, H., *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, (Edinburgh House Press: London), 1938, p.v. For a detailed study of Kraemer see Chapter Six.

called the “biblical realism” regarding God’s revelation in Christ and non-Christian religious traditions. According to Kraemer, other religions cannot be regarded as incomplete or needing fulfilment in Christ. He held that other religions are all human religious expressions and as such are in “error.” In retracing these developments of the ecumenical movement, Ariarajah points to two issues which he believes are fundamental to engaging with people of other faiths. The issues are the role of religious pluralism within God’s purpose and the “uniqueness” and “finality” of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> We will see Ariarajah coming back to this issue throughout his writings.

In *Gospel and Culture- an Ongoing Discussion in the Ecumenical Movement*, Ariarajah attempts to understand the role of culture in shaping the Christian message. In this process Ariarajah shows that when the Gospel came to Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific by Roman Catholic and Protestant missions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the evangelism went hand in hand with colonization and westernisation of these parts of the world. The result of this was the recognition of their own cultural and religious superiority which led them in most cases to the rejection of the culture of the people to whom the Gospel was addressed.<sup>11</sup>

After the end of colonialism a number of Churches began to reflect theologically on what it means to be a Church in their own context. Ariarajah shows that in Latin America reflection on the Gospel in the context of poverty and oppression challenged the Church to be committed to the struggle of the poor and a call for praxis oriented theological method. The churches in Asia, living predominantly in the context of people of other faiths developed “dialogue” as a way to engage with people of other faiths. Other parts of Asia highlighted the experience of the people such as *dalits* and *minjung* as the subject of theological reflection.<sup>12</sup>

For Ariarajah engagement with people of other faiths takes place in the context of dialogue. In dialogue, people of each community are treated as equal partners working

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.168-213.

<sup>11</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Interpreting the Missionary Mandate,” *Current Trends in Ecumenical Thinking*, (Thomas mar Athanasius Memorial Orientation Centre: Kottayam), 1992, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit, 1994, pp.36-37.



towards a “community.”<sup>13</sup> He argues that the missionary theology tended to emphasise the “differences” among religious communities, instead of “seeing ourselves as one community where people lived by different religious symbol systems, often comparable and shareable.”<sup>14</sup> In this understanding of a wider fellowship, the Church is one participant in and witness to the mission of God.

In reviewing the selection of his writings that is intended to be used in this chapter it is shown that Ariarajah goes beyond the mere study of another religion to an inner appreciation of its message and a concern for re-expressing the Christian message in relation to its neighbour. He wants to coherently develop a theology that engages with religious pluralism in a way that locates God at the centre; that the Bible is supportive of dialogue with people of other religious traditions; that Christian mission is to participate with people of other faiths in sharing, and being prophetic in the struggle against “mammon.”

## 5.2 The Theological influence of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith

In contemporary debate on religious pluralism, Ariarajah wants to go beyond a mere recognition of the diversity of religions that exist to a new theological understanding of the relationship between Christianity and people of other faiths. In this quest for a new relationship, traditional Christian theology is re-visited and develops a new understanding of Christian theology on the basis of new awareness and consciousness of the multi- religious context. Unlike the Christological event which is limited to the particularity of the Christ event, the theocentric model which God alone is at the centre and different religions represent different but equally valid ways to God.

In this connection, Ariarajah joins John Hick in challenging the churches to embrace the “Copernican Revolution.” In *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in Philosophy of*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp.31-34.

<sup>14</sup> Ariarajah, W., “My Dialogue Pilgrimage,” Pushparajan, A. (ed.), *Pilgrims of Dialogue: A Collection of Essays presented to Fr. Albert Nambiaparabil in honour of his 60th Birthday*, (Sangam Dialogue Centre: Munnar), 1991, p.34.

*Religion*, Hick argues for a Copernican revolution in Christian theological reflection, with the shift “to the realization that it is God who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.”<sup>15</sup> He finds support for this theocentric model in the realization that all religions, to one degree or another, believe in a transcendent reality. The differences that seem to exist between religions do not necessarily mean that the truth proclaimed by one religious tradition excludes the truth of another.

In order to solve the problem of knowing there is only one divine reality behind all the different religious traditions, Hick appeals to the Kantian distinction between a thing as it is in itself (the *noumenon*) and a thing as it is experienced by the human mind (the *phenomenon*).<sup>16</sup> In Hick’s opinion divine realities in world religions are human perceptions of the same reality. Yahweh, Allah, Krishna are not rival Gods but concrete divine realities that different faith communities respond to within their own cultural context.

However, Ariarajah does not appeal to the philosophical Kantian framework to find a resolution to the different experiences of people of various faiths. Instead, Ariarajah turns to the theological attempts made by the Western scholar and theologian, Wilfred Cantwell Smith.<sup>17</sup> Like Smith, Ariarajah defines the theocentric model in his belief in the universality of faith. By identifying with what Smith calls “experiential / relational faith” Ariarajah is able to solve the problem of different religious experiences found in people of other faiths. In other words, what are seemingly contradictory statements found in other religious traditions are only different expressions of the one divine experience.

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<sup>15</sup> Hick, J., *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, (The Macmillan Press: London), 1973, p.131.

<sup>16</sup> Hick, J., *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Response to the Transcendent*, (The Macmillan Press: London), 1981, p.442.

<sup>17</sup> Smith’s academic work started when he was at Lahore in Muslim India from 1941-1949. It was there that he began to study Islam and engage with Muslims. This engagement with Islam continued when he founded and led the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies in 1951.

In 1981, Wilfred Cantwell Smith published *Toward a World Theology* that seeks to interpret different religious traditions as part of a common religious history of humanity.<sup>18</sup> After examining the manifestations of religious faith in their historical development, Smith proposes that the religious achievements of humanity are part of a common thread of religious quest. For Smith, religion comprises of faith which is relational, belief(s) that is cognitive and cumulative tradition(s) that represents ethics, aesthetics and / or institutions.<sup>19</sup>

In Smith's view, despite all the differences that exist between religions, all religious experiences are expressions of a human activity which he calls "faith."<sup>20</sup> Faith is the relationship between a believer and God. It is this experience of being related to God that transforms the kind of people we have become. In this approach, there is recognition of faith as "a universal quality of human life."<sup>21</sup> Smith believes everyone has the potential for this kind of religious experience.

Smith further argues that belief must not be confused with faith. There needs to be a clear distinction between faith and belief. Belief is an intellectual category that is developed as a result of one's experience with the transcendent. Belief differs from people to people and religions to religions. For Smith religious belief is

The holding of certain ideas. Some might even see it as the intellect's translation (even reduction?) of transcendence into ostensible terms; the conceptualization in certain terms of the vision that, metaphorically, one has seen.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, religious belief for Smith is a concept or an idea which can be taken as true. Despite the seeming contradictory nature of belief, beliefs are different expressions of the common faith. In this new theological framework Christians will be required to re-think their expressions of Christian faith in new ways.

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, W., *Toward a World Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, W., *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, (Mentor: New York), 1964, pp.166-170.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.172.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, W., op. cit., 1981, pp.113-118.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, W., *Faith and Belief*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton), 1979, p12.

Religious experiences of different faith communities, therefore, should be seen as authentic encounter with the Divine. Therefore, comparison is not between faiths but between different beliefs and gods of world religions that are different human perceptions of the same reality. In place of Hick's application of the Kantian philosophical concept of the *noumenon* and the *phenomenon*, Ariarajah prefers to acknowledge them as different expressions of the same divine.

### 5.3 Towards an Asian Christian theology of religions

#### 5.3.1 God as creator and sustainer of all life

According to Ariarajah, an Asian Christian theology arises on the basis of recognising that the theological enterprise is conducted in the midst of other "praying and believing" people who have a long and rich spiritual history.<sup>23</sup> In this connection, Ariarajah agrees with his fellow Sri Lankan post-colonial theologian, Sugirtharajah that other religious traditions have used their sacred faith traditions as a source of inspiration in fighting oppression and degradation. In Sugirtharajah's view, these sacred traditions "have been God's accomplices in defending human dignity and offering solace to countless millions of other religious adherents."<sup>24</sup> So in light of South Asia's religious pluralism Ariarajah asks:

What do we make of the genuineness of the faith of our neighbours, of their experience of having been touched by the grace of God, of their highly ethical and moral lives that would often put us Christians to shame, of the enormously rich religious and devotional literature witnessing to a spiritual journey that is as fascinating as it is moving?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ariarajah, W., "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other religious Traditions," *CTC Bulletin*, 18/1 April 2002, p.16.

<sup>24</sup> Sugirtharajah, R.S., "Postscript: Achievements and Items for a Future Agenda," in *Voices from the Margin* (Orbis Books:New York)1995, p.440.

<sup>25</sup> Ariarajah, W., "What Difference does Religious Plurality Make?," p.1.

The Christian understanding of the Christ event leading to the interpretation that only one community of faith will be saved, excluding the majority of humanity, does not correspond to the understanding of a loving God who is concerned for all humanity. Therefore, Ariarajah looks for an alternative starting point for his theological approach to religious pluralism. In developing an Asian Christian theology of religions, Ariarajah starts with the affirmation that "God is the creator and sustainer of all life."<sup>26</sup> He sees God as being concerned with the whole of creation. What is important in this approach is that "all persons are equally the children of God."<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Ariarajah turns to the Baar Declaration<sup>28</sup> that

Begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God, present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind.... God's glory penetrates the whole creation.<sup>29</sup>

Ariarajah argues there are biblical texts and themes that testify to God being the God of all nations and peoples.<sup>30</sup> He refers to Amos 9:7 and Matthew 5:45 on how God makes the Sun rise on evil as well as good. In this 'covenant' with all nations, God guides all people through their own traditions. However, Ariarajah is quick to point out that this approach has not been practiced in the history of South Asian Christian engagement with other religious traditions. Instead, there has been an attempt to characterize other religions as "false," in "error" or in some way "preparatory" to the Christian message.<sup>31</sup>

Building on this foundation that God is concerned with the whole of humanity, Ariarajah draws the conclusion that throughout human history persons of each community have attempted to "understand, to draw near to, and to speak about the mystery of God."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit., 2002, p.21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The Baar Declaration was prepared to facilitate the Seventh Assembly of the WCC in Canberra in February 1991 on issues such as the significance of religious plurality, Christology, and the issues in understanding the activity of the Spirit in the world. Ariarajah, W., "Theological Perspectives on Plurality: A Significant Ecumenical Consultation in Baar, Switzerland," *Current Dialogue*, Vol.18, June 1990, p.1.

<sup>29</sup> Baar Statement, *Current Dialogue*, Vol.18, June 1990, p.4.

<sup>30</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1999, p.29.

<sup>31</sup> Ariarajah, W., "What Difference does religious Plurality make," p.1

<sup>32</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 2002, p.21.

This however raises the question of if there is only one mystery then why are there different expressions in approaching and understanding the Ultimate Reality? In Ariarajah's understanding, different religious traditions "have emerged in different contexts, cultures, and from different experiences."<sup>33</sup> It is therefore understandable that persons in each community will be attracted to an approach to the Ultimate Reality that is most "relevant" to their context.

For Ariarajah, an understanding of God transcends Christ in the sense that while for Christians God is disclosed in Christ, God is not restricted to the life and ministry of Christ. The tension reveals an attempt to balance the transcendence of God and the particularity of Christ.

### 5.3.2 Faith of Jesus in God rather than faith in Jesus as God

In the emerging pattern of a religious pluralism in the economy of salvation, what is the place of Christ? In other words, what is the relation between the universal activity of God towards all humanity and the universal redemptive activity of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ? The theo-centric view presented by Ariarajah argues that it is God who reaches out to people in various ways and Jesus is one person through whom God reached human beings. In this approach, any "uniqueness" of Jesus Christ as the universal constitutive element of salvation is dropped in favour of all religions, including Christianity representing many ways to God. In other words, Ariarajah bases his theological understanding on the fact that different religious traditions are different ways of responding to the divine mystery that permeates all of creation.

In so doing, Ariarajah challenges the exclusive Christian faith statements about the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ and the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. In fact, according to Ariarajah, the exclusive Christian faith statements are a product of "bad theology."<sup>34</sup> In an interview with World YWCA, he says:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ariarajah, W., "Searching for Interfaith Dialogue," *Common Concern*, June 1997, p.1.



A bad Christian doctrine is that God is not in relationship with other people. We Christians come to know something about God through the life of Jesus Christ. But it is an irrational belief if God could not be in relationship with people of other faiths.<sup>35</sup>

In light of this, Ariarajah calls for a re-interpretation of Christian theology of religious pluralism on the basis of his understanding that God who is revealed in Christ is also present and active in the lives of people of other faiths. However this is no easy task given what had occurred at the tenth world mission conference in San Antonio, Texas in 1989 where the central theological discourses was on Christology and its impact of religious pluralism.<sup>36</sup> While the San Antonio discussion was more open to the presence of God in the religious quest of other people, it nonetheless did not endorse the religious traditions of people of other faith as authentic ways of salvation.<sup>37</sup>

Ariarajah also maintains that since God is active in all cultures God's activity cannot be restricted to the life and work of Jesus Christ. This is not just an acknowledgement of the positive values found in world religions but an affirmation of God's presence in the religious life of our neighbours.<sup>38</sup> In Ariarajah's understanding, it is God who saves and Jesus Christ never takes the central place of God. Ariarajah argues that in the Bible, Jesus gradually "comes to the centre and God is pushed to the periphery. God is not celebrated as the saviour, but Christ is the saviour. Our new life is rooted not in God but in Christ."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Ariarajah argues that Jesus never calls himself the Son of God; he always refers to himself as Son of Man. Jesus, Ariarajah writes: "sees his primary function as the initiator of the kingdom of God." As such, it is "God who offers life to all who enter the kingdom." Jesus testifies to this kingdom and his own life "is entirely God-centred, God-dependent and God-ward."<sup>40</sup>

In this re-interpretation of Christ, Ariarajah's theology appears to be influenced by Bultmann's demythologization. Bultmann proposed his "de-mythology" in a 1941

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1999, p.112.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 2002, p.22.

<sup>39</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1985, p.24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.21.



lecture before a group of pastors of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt, Germany. His treatment of “de-mythology” can be seen throughout his theological work. It is in his *Jesus Christ and Mythology*<sup>41</sup> that Bultmann fully develops his understanding of de-mythology. Bultmann defined “de-mythology” as a hermeneutical process in that “the method of interpretation of the New Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions.”<sup>42</sup> The goal is not to abandon the mythological statements but “to interpret them.” The difficulty for Bultmann is that in contemporary western society “sacrificial mythology” is no longer significant. Furthermore, the triumph of Christ over Satan has become obsolete in a society that no longer believes in Satan. The challenge Bultmann faced was “how can we preserve the intention of the mythology and still proclaim an intelligible message?”<sup>43</sup>

Ariarajah does not take myth, valuable in itself, as a medium of religious truth. In this connection, Ariarajah is putting reason over mythological language. Like Christianity, Hinduism also expresses itself through mythic language. Myth in the *Bhagavad Gita* has a justification in itself. These myths provide positive values to their adherents. Therefore, meaning is in the nature of the myth, not in de-mythologising of it.

For Ariarajah the exclusive language of the Bible is not to be taken literally. He argues that the language of the Bible is the language of “faith” or “love.” He gives the example of the way two children relate to their fathers. No one can compare the truth statement of each child that their father is the “best father in the whole world.” So also, Ariarajah says, when we deal with the “faith” languages of other faiths.<sup>44</sup> Other faiths can receive the revelation of God and transformation independently of Jesus Christ.

Despite this, Ariarajah has no intention of undermining the commitment of Christians. In other words, the revelation of Christ is seen as the “Christian” revelation of *Logos*. However, there are particular salvific figures or revelations in different faith communities. Therefore it is not possible to “judge” the experiences and affirmations of

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, Roger, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Man*, (Collins: London) 1987.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.293.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ariarajah, W. op. cit. 1985, p.26.

one particular faith community from outside that faith community. This epistemological relativism enables Ariarajah to assert that while Christ is the Truth for Christians, this cannot be extended to affirm that it is truth for all people. J. T. Robinson endorses a complimentary understanding of Christology that revises the absolute and finality of the exclusive claims of Christ as the only path to experiencing God. Robinson argues in *Truth is Two Eyed*, that Jesus is a being on par with the saviours of other religions.<sup>45</sup>

Ariarajah wants to dismiss the divinity of Christ and using the synoptic Gospels he argues “in the synoptic environment it would be strange if Jesus were to say ‘I and the father are one,’ or ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’ There seems to be no claim to divinity or to oneness with God.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, what is found in the synoptic Gospels according to Ariarajah is “the challenge to live lives that are totally turned towards God.”<sup>47</sup> Jesus then is a teacher who wanted to do God’s will. In so doing, Ariarajah wants to show:

There is another witness to Jesus, different from the one that emerges when all the exclusive sayings are put together, and this witness in some ways stands in contradiction to the Jesus presented in those sayings.<sup>48</sup>

The Biblical writers were concerned about the ‘meaning’ of the life and teachings of Christ; therefore, it was a reflection from within the community. As a result, the confessional statements about Christ “derive their meaning in the context of faith, and have no meaning outside the community of faith.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the confession Christ is saviour may be meaningful to Christians but does not have any meaning to other religious communities.

Ariarajah also argues quests by humanity to understand and respond to God are “ambiguous.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, in each faith tradition there are elements that are both part of sin and salvific events. He recognized that those salvific constitutive elements are “special”

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<sup>45</sup> Robinson, J.T., *Truth is Two-eyed*, (SCM Press: London), 1979, p.129.

<sup>46</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit. 1985, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.22.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.23.

<sup>50</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 2002, p.23.

to that particular community and those that do not share in this “story” have “difficulty” in judging these experiences and affirmations.<sup>51</sup> In this connection, Ariarajah is once again indebted to the work of Cantwell Smith’s on sacred religious narratives as valid within each community.<sup>52</sup> In his work *What is Scripture*, Smith re-examines the concept of the traditional view of scripture in the light of the modern intellectual climate. According to Smith, in the modern period, with all the advantages of scientific inquiry, one cannot simply point to the Bible as the only sacred scripture in the midst of other sacred scriptures of other religions. Thus, he believes we need a new conceptual framework of “scripture” which will be able to comprehend this complex system. According to Smith, there is no “authority” inherent in a given text, but it is the faith community that gives its meaning to the text by treating in a certain way.<sup>53</sup> The theocentric view presented by Ariarajah argues that it is God who reaches out to people in various ways and Jesus is one person through whom God reached human beings. Thus, followers of other religious traditions are already participants in the salvific activity of God. Ariarajah referring to the fact that God is present and active in human history, says that:

All human life, not just an artificially isolated segment called the ‘religious life,’ and that all human beings, not just Christians, are part of God’s activity in the world and share a common future.<sup>54</sup>

In this understanding, salvation is expanded to include other understandings of salvations which are experienced by people of other religious traditions. Ariarajah locates God as working salvifically in each person’s community. In the missionary theology God’s revelation bypasses the creation. But Ariarajah stresses God acts as saviour everywhere not only in Jesus Christ. In this connection, the Christian community’s acceptance of the Christ- event does not “exclude God’s purposeful activity in and through other faiths.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, as Christians the goal is to “discern”

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See Smith, W.C., *What is Scripture*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis), 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.ix, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Religion and Plurality: Central Theological Issues in the Christian Faith,” <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd37-07.html>, p.2

<sup>55</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Theology of dialogue,” Rousseau, R. W., (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: Facing the Next frontier*, (Ridge Row Press: Montrose), 1981, p.43.

in the life of each community the saving grace of God and join together in building the kingdom of God.

Ariarajah challenges the concept of “salvation-history” understood as the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of one history of salvation because it limits the work of God’s salvation to one particular community, Israel. However, for Ariarajah, God is active in the history of the whole humanity and “salvation history is the history of the whole humankind.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, in the history of each community, one is able to discern the salvation that God offers to all people. In this connection, Soares- Prabhu agrees with Ariarajah that the whole human history is the arena of God’s saving grace. “If Christ is indeed the Word made flesh who ‘enlightens every man coming into this world’; if ‘the whole universe is created through him and towards him,’ wrote Soares- Prabhu, “then the pre-history of Christ cannot possibly be restricted to the history of Israel, but must reach out to the history of the universe itself.”<sup>57</sup>

According to Ariarajah, for the Christian community, it is in the Christ-event that salvation is seen. As Christians we know this and must witness to this reality. However, this does not mean that persons of other faith communities need to accept Christ in order to be saved. God’s activity in the history of the world brings non-Christians to salvation, the way God wills but not the way Christians know it. Building on this understanding of God’s saving grace, Ariarajah believes will help us to be in the midst of struggles and hopes of people of other faiths in order for us to “together seek the community that God intends for all his people.”<sup>58</sup>

## 5.4 Contextualization of the Christian faith in South Asia

According to Ariarajah, the difficulty has been that the churches in Asia have been under the “bondage” of western Christian theology. As a result of “importing” the religious myths and symbols there was an alienation from the culture and religious ethos of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit. 1981, p.43.

<sup>57</sup> Soares-Prabhu, G., “The Inspiration of the Old Testament as seen by the new and its implication for the possible inspiration of non-Christian Scriptures,” D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre) 1974, p.109.

<sup>58</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1981, p.44.

communities in which it lives.<sup>59</sup> Ariarajah wants to break this “bondage” and interpret the Christian faith from the experiences of his own context. In order to live and function in this religiously plural world, Ariarajah argues, we need to take theological account of the religious traditions of the people of other faiths in South Asia.

In 1980 in the article “an experiment in Dialogical Theology,” Ariarajah draws on the work of his fellow Sri Lankan Methodist theologian Lynn de Silva to show an example of “dialogical theology” that is in dialogue with people of other faiths. *The Problem of self in Buddhism and Christianity* is a book that was produced as a result of many years of dialogue with Buddhists. In this book De Silva attempted to understand Buddhism on its own terms and proceeded to understand Buddhism within Christianity and Christianity within Buddhism. The result of this endeavour was a “new” understanding of Buddhism by Christians and also a way to help Buddhist understand Christianity within their conceptual framework.<sup>60</sup> It is no surprise that Ariarajah would turn to de Silva because Ariarajah’s formative theological influences of his life also came from theologians such as Lynn de Silva (1919-1982) who “opened” the eyes of Ariarajah to see the “hurt and suspicion” felt by his neighbours of other faiths regarding the Christian Church from the missionary era and showed the young Ariarajah new pioneering approaches to people of other faiths.<sup>61</sup>

In another article “*The water of life*” Ariarajah attempts to develop his own “dialogical theology.”<sup>62</sup> This article is structured “a universal symbol,” “waters of chaos and creation” and “waters of healing and purification.” This is supplemented by “the waters in the Bible” that looks at “waters of life” in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Regarding water as a universal symbol of life, Ariarajah takes as his text “in waters, O Lord, is your seat ... in the waters, O Lord, is your womb” (*Satpatha Brahmana*, XII, 8, 2:4) and ends with Saint Paul’s image pertaining to water in the image of baptism.<sup>63</sup> For Ariarajah, water in the Bible is a symbol of the “outpouring” of God’s grace which he

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<sup>59</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Christian Minorities Amidst Other Faith Traditions: A Third World Contribution,” *The Ecumenical Review*, Index Vol.41, 1989, p.21.

<sup>60</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit. 1991, pp.34-35.

<sup>61</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit. pp.34-35.

<sup>62</sup> Ariarajah, W., “The Water of Life,” *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 34, 1982, pp. 271-279.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

equates with life, of which the Vedic tradition speaks. However, Ariarajah does not mention the earlier work examining the waters in the Gospel of St. John by Sister Vandana in 1981. In *Waters of Fire*, Sister Vandana examines the symbol of “water” in John’s Gospel and in the Hindu tradition in order to accentuate the mystical elements found in both traditions.<sup>64</sup>

Despite his concern for Dalit and women’s issues, Ariarajah’s emphasis on interpretation is on the symbol and less on the human struggle in the story. In this sense, for Ariarajah the notion of contextual theology is idealized and becomes a-priori which ignores the social and economic reality. Unfortunately, Ariarajah does not develop this kind of engagement with Hindu categories in any of his future work. Instead, the focus shifts to the wider discussion of Christian engagement with religious pluralism in the hope that it could not only benefit the ongoing theological work among Indian theologians, but also contribute to wider theological discussions as well.

Ariarajah believes “dialogue” is a contextual theological issue that Churches in Asia needs to address.<sup>65</sup> “Living predominantly in the context of other living faiths, [Churches in Asia] developed theological traditions that sought to re – evaluate the theological significance of religious plurality.”<sup>66</sup> Ariarajah uses the phrase “the dialogue ministry” or “the ministry of dialogue”<sup>67</sup> to represent the “new” attitude towards people of other faiths and defines dialogue as “an encounter between people who live by different faith traditions, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance.”<sup>68</sup> As the definition suggests, dialogue presupposes a willingness to learn and treat one another in equal terms. The theology of dialogue is rooted in the affirmation that the human community is the “locus of God’s activity.”<sup>69</sup> In this understanding all human life is part of God’s activity and shares a common future. Ariarajah points out that those who are engaged in dialogue had to deal with a series of concerns that dialogue would lead to

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<sup>64</sup> Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, (CLS: Madras, first published), 1980.

<sup>65</sup> Ariarajah, W. op. cit. 1994, p.36.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit. 1999, p.83

<sup>68</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Inter-faith Dialogue,” <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/diction.html>, p.1.

<sup>69</sup> Ariarajah, W. op. cit. 1981, p.43.



syncretism, to compromising the finality of Christ and the demise of mission itself.<sup>70</sup> Despite these reservations, Ariarajah argues that dialogue has become “an established concern” within the ecumenical movement.

Ariarajah is aware that there are no ready-made dialogues that will meet the needs of all people at all times. In dialogue, Christians must find ways to relate to people of other faiths. In this connection, identity becomes an important issue.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Ariarajah points out that in the western nations where Christians are in a majority are more able to be in dialogue without fear of losing identity than in countries like India where Christians are a minority.<sup>72</sup> However, Ariarajah stresses the point that in dialogue there “should not be a threat to anyone’s identity or to the existence of any community.”<sup>73</sup>

This concern for contextual dialogue challenges Ariarajah to take seriously the issue of caste that exists within Hinduism in India. This issue was highlighted by an Indian bishop<sup>74</sup> who told Ariarajah “the whole dialogue programme of the WCC in relation to Indian has no credibility at all because your partners are our oppressors.”<sup>75</sup> According to the Bishop to dialogue with a religion that upholds a caste-based society would be an approval of the caste system by the Christian partners and a lack of solidarity with the oppressed. In light of this, Ariarajah asks, should Christians in India, then, suspend their dialogue with Hindus in mainstream Hinduism because the social structure is oppressive? And does dialogue with classical Hinduism amount to a betrayal of the dalit cause?<sup>76</sup>

Ariarajah writes he “agonized” over this issue during his tenure at the WCC where it was his responsibility to develop relationships with Hindus and Buddhists. He argues

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<sup>70</sup> Ariarajah, W. “Ministry of Dialogue: Looking to the Future,” Russell, C.J. (ed.), *Third World Theologies in Dialogue: Essays in Memory of D.S. Amalorpavadass*, (Associations of Ecumenical Third World Theologians), 1991, p.162.

<sup>71</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Ecumenical Issues in Dialogue,” Sreenivasan, R., (ed.), *Interfaith Dialogue and World Community*, (CLS: Madras), 1991, p.68.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> He does not name the Bishop

<sup>75</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1999, p.79.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



that solidarity with the dalit cause does not stop dialogue with Hindus of “higher” castes.<sup>77</sup> Looking at the population of India in general, he points out that nearly sixty percent of the Indian population belong to “caste Hinduism.” Therefore, “to say that we should not converse with “higher” Hinduism is to cut off our contacts with the religion of a substantial part of the Indian population.”<sup>78</sup> He writes:

While there may be occasions when we must disassociate ourselves from attitudes and practices that lead to large-scale discrimination, we cannot insist in the first instance that a community’s teachings, ethical and moral conduct or structures should be acceptable to us in order to enter into dialogue.<sup>79</sup>

He also points out that there were religious leaders from the Brahmin caste who have fought caste and untouchability and movements within Hinduism have sought to break down the caste barriers.<sup>80</sup> Despite the caste feature of the social structure, Ariarajah argues, Hinduism has also been the “cradle” of philosophical thoughts, devotional poetry, architecture, music and drama. He writes:

The argument that all these must be rejected because they emanate from an oppressive religion is not convincing. And we cannot forget that such ambiguity besets all religious traditions and their cultural heritage.<sup>81</sup>

Ariarajah’s theological position is in sharp contrast with dalit theologians who criticised *Advaita* tradition as a context for Indian Christian theology. Ariarajah’s own theology makes no attempt to reconcile *Vedantic* teaching with Dalit theology. Neither does he show any sensitivity to the arguments of theologians like Samuel Rayan (see Chapter Four) who sees no accommodation with the caste tradition of Hinduism.

Dialogue occurs in the context of mutual trust and openness and respecting the otherness of the dialogue partner. However, Ariarajah does not believe interfaith dialogue is “an ambulance service” that intervenes over concrete situations where religious communities

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp.81-82.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.82.

are in conflict. He sees interfaith dialogue that seeks to prevent communities from getting into conflict in the first instance.<sup>82</sup>

Ariarajah identifies three different types of inter-religious dialogue.<sup>83</sup> Firstly, “dialogue of life” occurs in the everyday life among people of different religious traditions who live in the same community. In this dialogue, there is no explicit exchange of religious belief. This happens in the dialogue of discourse. Here, people can articulate their belief and exchange ideas. Secondly, in “the dialogue of spirituality,” participants seek “to go beyond words to encounter the other at the level of the heart.” This dialogue attracts those “who feel that the essential unity of humanity cannot be expressed in words, but must be celebrated in worship and meditation.” The last type of inter-religious dialogue is “the dialogue of action” which is characterized by co-operation among people of different religious traditions. The goal in this dialogue is to work towards co-operation and joint action “as the way to bring harmony and unity among different religious communities.”<sup>84</sup> In this dialogue, there is the presence and activity of God who is caring and saving humanity. Through this process, Christians discover new dimensions of the ‘Reign of God’ that deepens and enriches their own understanding and experience.

The issue for Ariarajah is whether dialogue is an alternative to mission. Ariarajah admits that dialogue challenge certain “particular concepts of mission ... and misconceived ideas of evangelism.”<sup>85</sup> The task of dialogue, according to Ariarajah is to “build” and to “plant” “a new concept of Christian witness.”<sup>86</sup> In this process, dialogue is not an “instrument” of mission but in humility sharing of each others experiences and convictions.

## 5.5 Re-reading the Bible in the light of religious pluralism

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<sup>82</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1991, p.166.

<sup>83</sup> Ariarajah, W., “Pluralism and Harmony,” *Current Dialogue*, Vol. 25, December 1993.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>85</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit. 1978, p.265.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

In a theo-centric approach, attention is given to the theo-centric statements of Jesus. Therefore it is no surprise that Ariarajah highlights scriptures that deal with the whole of humanity, rather than just Israel. According to Coward "Jesus' role as the one who points to and reveals God is highlighted and attention is drawn away from Jesus' statements equating himself with God."<sup>87</sup> He illustrates this point clearly with referring to biblical passages such as "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) is emphasised more than passages such as "I and my Father are one." (John 10:30)<sup>88</sup>

Ariarajah wants to re-examine and re-interpret the Bible given the present context of religious plurality because he wants "to enable the Church to come to a new relationship with people of other faiths."<sup>89</sup> He acknowledges that the Bible does not set out to make a statement about world religions or about plurality, much less about religious plurality. The first part of the Bible is the story of the struggle of the Hebrews, who had come out of slavery to knit themselves into a nation under a covenant relationship with the God of their ancestors. In the second part, Christians celebrate what they believe God to have done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of humankind.<sup>90</sup>

Being convinced that exclusivistic texts in the Bible are often used "divisively and judgementally," Ariarajah starts by questioning; does the Bible support dialogue with people of other faiths? Or do the teachings of Jesus contradict genuine dialogue? Ariarajah recognises that for too long the Church has preached an exclusive Gospel message that demands abandoning the faith of one's ancestors. He writes:

For many centuries the Bible itself and particularly certain verses in the Bible have been used ...to show why people should become Christians, leaving behind the faiths of their ancestors.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Coward, H., op. cit., 1985, p26.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1991, p.36.

<sup>90</sup> Ariarajah, W., "Reading the Bible in a Pluralistic Context," *The Ecumenical Review*, January 1999, p.5.

<sup>91</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 1985, p.xii.

Lack of a normative hermeneutical method further complicates the matter for Ariarajah. As a result, he searches the scriptures for an alternative reading that shows openness in engaging with people of other faiths.<sup>92</sup> Thus he writes in the introduction:

In fact, given the material that we have in the Bible, there is no argument to be won. All that one can hope to do is to show another side of the Bible that makes a clear case for a new attitude to people of other faiths.<sup>93</sup>

Selecting specific biblical passages, Ariarajah hopes to find an inclusive biblical teaching in the Bible that is positive towards people of other faiths.<sup>94</sup>

Ariarajah is conscious of biblical passages that reflect the self-understanding of Christians as God's elect from passages such as John 3:16, 18; 14:6; and Acts 4:11-12. However, he argues that there is another biblical tradition that reveals a continuation of the creation theme within the context of God's covenant with Israel and God's universal relationship with all nations. In doing this, Ariarajah sets the story of Israel and of the Church in the context of "God's love and concern for the whole creation."<sup>95</sup> Making references to Psalm 24 and Psalm 104, he concludes since God is sovereign of the whole world, everything in the cosmos belongs to him. This implies that there is literally nothing that falls outside God's providence. The universal covenant is highlighted to illustrate that the whole human community is God's people.<sup>96</sup> This vision of the "universal covenant" formulates that God is active not just with one particular community but God is active with the whole of humanity.

It is not just in the Old Testament that God remains the caring God of all the nations and peoples of the earth. The New Testament also reveals the unconditional love of God towards all people, "irrespective of who they are."<sup>97</sup> Ariarajah points out that the ministry of Jesus was not against other religions, but against false religions. According to Ariarajah, Jesus' challenge of the reign of God is a "call to love God totally and to

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p.xiii.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.xiv.

<sup>95</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit., 1999, p.7.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pp.7-9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p.10.

love one's neighbour as oneself."<sup>98</sup> The Book of Revelation, Ariarajah infers, returns to the Biblical vision of plurality as attested in the Old Testament. In this vision, there are nations bringing their own glory into the city "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it .... People will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations." (Rev. 21:24-26.) What is central to this re-reading of the Bible is the affirmation that there is only one family-the human family. In other words, "not only does God have a life with all peoples, all peoples also have stories of their life with God."<sup>99</sup>

Ariarajah observes that all religious traditions express the human experience of faith. To support his view, he provides examples from several South Asian religious traditions. The Hindu may speak of his/her religious experience within a 'story' that has a particular view of history, the law of *Karma* and re-birth and an understanding of the essential unity between human beings and God. The Buddhist may examine the nature of human beings and the universe. Ultimately, "all stories have no enduring value in themselves, except to give a framework within which the community celebrates its faith and experience."<sup>100</sup> The goal therefore is to understand that the Christian "story" is one way of understanding that reality.

The purpose of reading multiple religious texts is no longer despising or contradicting other people's texts. The goal is not to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian scripture above other scriptures but to read the scriptures of one's neighbour's faith to appreciate and identify the differences. Each scripture must be allowed to be unique and speak on its own terms. There should be no exaltation or degradation of other scriptures. In this there is the understanding that all texts inspire and one text can not subdue the other. Thus, the purpose of this new approach is how the diversity of texts can help in creating collective identities without diluting the distinctiveness of each tradition. For Ariarajah, all scriptures are trying to understand the mercy of God and the mystery of life and to give meaning to life and answer the question of mortality. The uniqueness is the diversity of stories that express themselves in different forms and contents.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit., 2002, p.26.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

## 5.6 Mission in a religiously plural context

The issue of dialogue had far reaching impact not only with the relationship with persons of other faith traditions but also on the understanding of mission. Ariarajah points out that at the WCC meeting held at Nairobi in 1975 there was a “stiff resistance” within the ecumenical fellowship between the traditional understanding of mission as converting others to become Christians and dialogue were the concept of ‘mutual witness’ as the context of witness.<sup>101</sup>

It is natural, according to Ariarajah that those within that faith community want to “witness” it to others. Thus, in Ariarajah’s understanding, “there is an ‘exclusive’ and ‘missionary’ dimension in all religions which is expressed in variety of ways.”<sup>102</sup> For Christians, the Christ-event is the constitutive event. Yet, for Ariarajah, Christians are one among many people of God. In doing so, we come to the heart of Ariarajah’s conviction that no one experience of the mystery of God exhausts the full mystery of God. Ariarajah states, “While Christianity is distinct and different from others, there is no reason to believe that it is in anyway superior to others or that it has been the culmination or end of other revelatory experiences.”<sup>103</sup>

Ariarajah agrees that the Church has a “missionary mandate.” One interpretation of the missionary mandate is conceiving mission of the Church in terms of calling people to an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ. However, according to Ariarajah, in light of the ecumenical debate, this is a “limited” understanding of mission.<sup>104</sup> In this context, Ariarajah believes that the Christian mission has been a “failure” because of the “unhelpful” theology of religions and missions. He points to the historical missionary movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that had the basic conviction that the Christian faith “would completely replace other religious traditions.”<sup>105</sup> However in South Asia, Ariarajah points out that people such as Mahatma Gandhi have heard the

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<sup>101</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit., 1999, p.102.

<sup>102</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 2002, p.21.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ariarajah, W., op.cit., 1992, p.1.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.2.

Gospel but have chosen not to become a Christian, challenges the interpretation of the missionary mandate.<sup>106</sup>

Ariarajah sees a “new” theology of missions emerging. He argues that in the contemporary missionary enterprise, most people agree that there should be an open and courteous relationship with people of other faiths. The fundamental principle in Ariarajah’s theology of mission then is that the Christian mission “is to participate in the mission of God and to witness to God’s love in Christ precisely because God is already present with the people of Asia.”<sup>107</sup> This understanding of mission is closely linked to his concept of dialogue. Ariarajah believes while Christians believe in the unique ministry of Jesus Christ, God is also “creatively” working in the religious experience of other religious traditions. In this process, Ariarajah goes beyond recognizing God’s activity in “seeking” the religious truth in traditions of people of other faiths.

The mission of the Church is not just about saving souls. The primary mission is to build up the ‘reign of God’ through collaboration with peoples of different religious communities. Therefore in this process of building a new humanity, other religions are all equal and co-workers offering different religious dimensions to humanity’s quest for a holistic life. Religious traditions of people of other faiths then become liberative elements in the project of bringing life and freedom. This common theme, according to Ariarajah, is capable of uniting all peoples in a common quest relevant to their own context. The purpose is not to re-iterate “out-dated” expressions of faith but to experience the love of God that is revealed in different ways in different contexts.<sup>108</sup>

According to Ariarajah, there is a need to move from the concept of conversion to the concept of healing. He writes, “Christian witness is about bringing healing, wholeness and new life into the lives of individuals, communities and nations and not about increasing the number of Christians in the world.”<sup>109</sup> Ariarajah highlights the social implications of a new convert. The “responsibility” of mission must include healing of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>107</sup> Ariarajah, W., op. cit., 2002, p.3

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p.21.



the human spirit as well as challenging the unjust social structures. In other words, the responsibility of Christian mission is not just advocating the Lordship of Christ above all religions but working towards “a common humanity.” Thus for Ariarajah, anyone who participates in social and economic justice is involved in the mission of God. In this connection, Ariarajah concurs with Samuel Rayan in taking liberation as a motif for mission.

## 5.7 Critical Appraisal of Ariarajah’s Theo-centric theology

The theo-centric model of Ariarajah showed a theological response to religious pluralism that moved away from a Christ-centred model to one that places God at the centre. Ariarajah’s thought not only embraces religious experience but also set up a common foundation for all religious experiences. In other words, Ariarajah affirms that religious traditions relate to the same reality and that insofar as religions seek to transform human life, they can all be accepted as providing ways of salvation. All religions are ways to God and on this basis Ariarajah acknowledges the validity of all religions. He lays his emphasis on the reality of God, thus escaping from the limitations of exclusivism.

He argues that exclusivism and inclusivism are inadequate to engage with people of other faiths. Therefore, in South Asia, an engagement with religious pluralism requires a change in theological thought that affirms the diversity of religious experience from the standpoint of theocentricism. This has two important characteristics. Firstly, it affirms world religions are different human perceptions of the same reality. Secondly, that insofar as religions seek to build a “community,” they can all be accepted as offering different ways aimed at salvation.

Wesley Ariarajah, while arguing for a theology that escapes bondage to the West, in fact draws heavily from western intellectual traditions that he assumes fit the contextual challenges of Sri Lanka/ India/ Asia; that by embracing Bultmann’s de-mythologisation, Ariarajah ignores the value of myth in Hindu culture, and privileges a rationalist/ humanist approach to truth; that while arguing for a hermeneutical method

that acknowledges the “stories” of other scriptural tradition, Ariarajah fails to develop an inter-scriptural hermeneutic in the way he interprets the Bible; that Ariarajah, while making a useful distinction between a sociological and theological understanding of conversion, applies it ambiguously in his own writings as deals with the former more by way of caricature of Evangelical commitments to conversion, than by serious missiological analysis.

## Conclusion

Wesley Ariarajah’s theological framework provides yet another Christian theological response in an attempt to engage with religious pluralism in South Asia. The theocentric approach affirms the freedom of God to be God as distinct from being conceived from a certain doctrinal way of understanding God. In other words, God is apprehended in faith relationally and effectively before God is idealised cognitively.

Pentecostals can learn from the theo-centric paradigm, while recognising that some of its basic elements are not likely acceptable: the universality of divine providence based on the theology of creation, even as a Pentecostal holds firm to belief in the salvific significance of Jesus; that the conceptual distinction between faith, belief, and cumulative tradition (WC Smith) that opens the way to a discriminating engagement with “religion” and other religious, even as a Pentecostal gives definitive status to Jesus; and that the challenge of reading the Bible together with other “stories,” even as a Pentecostal gives ultimate value to the Bible as scripture. A basis for Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism will only occur when there is a serious theological engagement with these issues.

## Religious Pluralism and Pentecostalism in India

## Introduction to Part Three

### Religious Pluralism and Pentecostalism in India

#### Introduction

It has been the presupposition of this thesis that contextualization of Christianity in India is an imperative in order for the Christian faith to take deeper roots in India. In this quest Christian engagement with religious pluralism is of utmost importance. Part Two of this thesis has shown how three prominent Christian theologians from the Indian sub-continent sought to explore Indian Christian theological engagement with religious pluralism and the issues / challenges these approaches present to Pentecostals.

The aim of Part Three is to examine critical issues arising from contemporary discourse on religious pluralism for Indian Pentecostals. It will be argued that Pentecostals need to address the universal presence / activity of God; economy of salvation / redemption; the Kingdom of God and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Far from rejecting these issues Pentecostals need to identify them as theological concerns that require attention for the contextualization of Pentecostalism in India. It will also explore how Indian Pentecostals would begin to address these emerging perspectives while being grounded in Biblical fidelity.

Chapter Six will demonstrate that the Pentecostal tradition in India has shown a degree of resistance in engaging with religious pluralism. While the neglect of engaging with the non-Christian religious traditions is a theological problem for Indian Pentecostals, there are non-Indian Pentecostals who have engaged in Pentecostal reflection on religious pluralism.

Chapter Seven will assess the theological work of Samartha, Rayan, and Ariarajah that provided a cross section of reflection including Pneumato-centric, Liberative, and Theo-centric approaches and provides bases for an Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism. In so doing, this chapter will demonstrate that Pentecostals cannot afford to neglect engaging with religious pluralism. The use of the word “bases” does not imply

an articulation of a Pentecostal theological approach to religious pluralism. It implies that there is an attempt to address perennial issues in engaging with religious pluralism and that Pentecostals have an insight to this field of Christian concern. In this connection, it will be argued that in dialogue with popular religions Pentecostals will have a “window” to engage with people of other faiths.

## Chapter Six

### Christological approach: An Indian Pentecostal approach to religious pluralism

#### Introduction

This thesis so far has examined the religiously plural context in which Christianity in Indian has developed, analyzing different approaches to Indian Christian theology that Indian Pentecostals in the view of this researcher are challenged to take into consideration in engaging with people of other faiths. The aim of this chapter is to examine the current state of discourse on religious pluralism within the Indian Pentecostal community and among selected Pentecostalist theologians from outside India.

It will be argued that while other contemporary Indian Christian theologians tend to have reacted negatively toward Barth and Kraemer, there is a similarity between the theology of these latter and Indian Pentecostal view of religion. The chapter will then examine two variant Indian Pentecostalist approaches to theological engagement with religious pluralism. The first, represented by Ambumkayathu, adopts classical *logos* theology which sees Christ as the incarnation of the creative word of God present throughout creation. Padinjarekara, like the previous example, suggests a *logos* Christology but applies it in a fulfillment direction, particularly in the concept of *Prajapati*. Finally, the chapter will review selected Pentecostal theologians from global Pentecostal community in order to discern their relevance for Indian Pentecostalists. The principal global Pentecostal theologians who will be considered in this chapter are Anderson and his analysis of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and spirits in the African indigenous religious traditions; Suurmond and his interpretation of the mission of the Church as participating in the universal reconciling work of God through the charismatic celebration of the Spirit; Solivan and his engagement with one of the defining realities of the majority of Pentecostals: the poverty of the people; and Yong and his pneumatological approach to religions by way of Pentecostal-charismatic experience of the Spirit. By examining the thought of these selected non-Indian Pentecostals, the chapter can offer a challenging insight to Indian Pentecostal theologians in their own search for engagement with religious pluralism.

## 6.1 The influence of western theology of religious pluralism on Indian Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism

### 6.1.0 Selection of Barth and Kraemer

As distinct from early Indian Christian theologians as examined in Chapter Two, the Indian Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism is influenced by western Christian missionary theologies. In the absence of their own scholarly theological expertise Indian Pentecostals sought guidance from Western theology, looking especially toward Barth and Kraemer. While other Indian Christian theologians tend to have reacted rather negatively toward Barth and Kraemer, the theological influence of these latter continues to resonate among Indian Christian Pentecostals.

### 6.1.1 Karl Barth- Religion as Unbelief

The dominant Indian Pentecostal view of religions as human attempts to reach God has its origin in the Barthian critique of religion. Barth was unequivocal in his affirmation that humankind can have no knowledge of God other than by God Himself. Humans cannot attain this knowledge through the world or through individual abilities. Knowledge of God is available only through revelation as an act of divine grace through which God discloses God's Self to reconcile humankind to God.

In revelation God tells man that He is God, and that as such He is the Lord. In telling him this, revelation tells him something utterly new, something which apart from revelation he does not know....It is also true that man is so placed towards Him that he can know Him. But is it this very truth which is not available to man before it is told him in revelation.<sup>1</sup>

In this understanding, it is through faith that humankind responds to revelation. Faith requires no human reasoning or external evidence; it is, rather, the subjective experience of God that constitutes the basis of human knowledge of God. Barth wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh), 1963, p.301.



The activity which corresponds to revelation [is] faith: the recognition of the self-offering and self-manifestation of God... We need to be ready and resolved simply to let the truth be told to us, and therefore to be apprehended by it.<sup>2</sup>

Religion, by contrast, is, according to Barth, the act of human effort to know God. It is the human attempt to understand God apart from, or in opposition to the revelation of God in Christ: "In religion man ventures to grasp at God. Because it is grasping, religion is a contradiction of revelation, the concentrated expression of human disbelief..."<sup>3</sup> This false confidence in the human ability to reach God is, for Barth, the fundamental error of religion, tantamount to "unbelief." Faith and religion therefore exist in polarity to each other. In the same sense, Jesus Christ as the self revelation of God is the antithesis of religion. Barth therefore rejected any attempt to portray Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of religion:

Jesus Christ does not fill out and improve all the different attempts of man to think of God and to present Him according to his own standard. As the self-offering and self-manifestation of God, He replaces and completely outbids those attempts, putting them in the shadows to which they belong.<sup>4</sup>

For Barth God's entire self-revelation was historicized in Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Christ becomes the complete and apprehensible revelation of God.

However, Barth believed that religion can be "justified" in the sense that it can be made true by response to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In other words, it is possible to speak of "true religion" in the same way as we speak of a "justified sinner, i.e. as a creature of grace." According to Barth:

No religion is true. It can only become true... and it can become true only in the way that man is justified, from without: i.e. not of his own nature and being, but only by virtue of a reckoning, adopting and separating that are foreign to its own nature. Like justified man, true religion is a creature of grace.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.301-302.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.302.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.308.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp.325-326.

Christian religion is historically like all other religions, but “justified” insofar as it responds to Jesus Christ. In other words, insofar as Christianity functions in light of the revelation, it can be rightfully called the “true religion.”

The Christian religion is the true one only as we listen to the divine revelation...a statement we dare to make only as a statement of faith which is thought and expressed in faith and from faith, i.e. in recognition and respect of what we are told by revelation.<sup>6</sup>

Revelation then becomes understood in Christological terms where the revelation of God is disclosed in Jesus Christ. As such, the revelation of Jesus Christ defines the terms by which “true religion” can be recognized.

### 6.1.2 Hendrik Kraemer- Missiological approach

Hendrik Kraemer was influenced by the early thought of Karl Barth and continued his line of argument. Kraemer’s most influential publication, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, written at invitation of International Missionary Council for its 1938 meeting in Tambaram, India, includes a chapter to the Christian attitude towards non-Christian religions. Kraemer saw non-Christian religions as “all-inclusive systems and theories of life, rooted in a religious basis,” which “therefore at the same time embrace a system of culture and civilization and a definite structure of society and state.”<sup>7</sup> He wrestled with the concepts of general revelation and natural theology in relation to non-Christian religions and asked:

Are nature, reason and history sources of revelation in the Christian sense of the word? If so, what is the relation of the Christian revelation and its implications to the body of human self-unfolding which takes place in philosophy, religion, culture, art and the other domains of life?<sup>8</sup>

Kraemer was very critical of the idea that non-Christian scriptures may be substituted for the Old Testament “as a preparation for the Gospel.”<sup>9</sup> He commented, “However intelligible it may be in the existing circumstances, it is born out of a deep-seated

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.102.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.103.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.329.

religious and theological confusion.”<sup>10</sup> He argued that this “marriage” between the non-Christian scriptures and New Testament is “incompatible” and would result in “divorce.”<sup>11</sup> Historically speaking the New Testament would be “wholly unintelligible” without the Old Testament. This according to Kraemer was:

Not because these documents of the non-Christian religions are inferior as documents of human religious experience- they are in many respects splendid- but because it is simply an adulteration of feeling and thinking to treat the documents of radically naturalist, unprophetic religions, which, because of the cyclic conception of life, lack all sense of the vital relation of God to history, as the introduction to the basic elements of the prophetic religion of Biblical realism.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of ‘biblical realism’ is central in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, which he used to express his understanding of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Theologians such as Walter M. Horton argued that the term ‘realism’ was intentionally used by Kraemer over against the Christian idealism that developed in Europe, especially Germany, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> For example, Kraemer’s theology is the antithesis of Farquhar’s theology examined in Chapter One of this thesis. Farquhar’s idealistic theology was based on the assumption that evolution is a law of history. He could be confident therefore, that Indians would renounce caste for a more egalitarian social structure. Kraemer believed this was unrealistic. He argued that the Bible presents a much more realistic view of humankind by assessing the human condition of sinfulness in the light of God’s own perfection, disclosed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This biblical witness provides an insight into who God is and the nature of humanity and the condition of the world. This revelation of reality is different from any other understanding of existence in that it is only in light of this Gospel that the condition of humanity is adequately treated. This is due to that fact that God is “the all- pervading centre in total reality” which is embodied in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.332.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, W. “Tambaram Twenty-five Years After,” *Philosophy, Religion and the Coming World Civilization: Essays in Honor of William Ernest Hocking*, Leroy S. Rouner (ed), (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff) 1966, p.229-230.

<sup>14</sup> Kreamer, H, op. cit., p.41.

The Bible is the record of the events and actions of God with humanity that “proclaims and asserts realities” which Kraemer called “biblical realism.”<sup>15</sup> This means acceptance of the real saving and revealing acts of God in the death and resurrection of Christ. Kraemer believed that the truth about God and humankind is revealed perfectly in Christ. Furthermore, no biblical events, however seemingly insignificant, should be overlooked in understanding the reality of human existence and divine- human relationship. In this context, the Bible is viewed holistically in interpreting the “totality of existence.”

Another important characteristic of Kraemer’s theology is the discontinuity between Gospel and religion. The Christian Gospel is the special revelation of God and as such there is a discontinuity with all religions. According to Kraemer, Bible takes realistic view of the human condition in terms of its spiritual and ethical analysis of sinfulness of humankind. God deals with this by not simply setting forth principles but God actually deals realistically with the human condition by sending Jesus Christ.

The variety of expressions found in Hinduism “is the outstanding and characteristic embodiment of the primitive apprehension of existence and of naturalistic monism.”<sup>16</sup> In this understanding, “just as Nature is not interested in truth, but in manifestation, in realizations, in shades, so Hinduism is not really interested in religious truth but in the endless possibilities of religious realization and expression.”<sup>17</sup>

Hinduism according to Kraemer belongs to “primitive religion” and as such is full of “magic.” For Kraemer the only religion that has vanquished magic “is the prophetic religion of Biblical realism.”<sup>18</sup> The gods of Hinduism are the by-product of “the projections of human will, desires and thoughts.”<sup>19</sup> Even the religious philosophy of *Vedanta* is only a “primitive apprehension of existence.” The *bhakti* tradition which he acknowledged as having theological similarities is “radically different from the religion of Biblical realism”<sup>20</sup> because the only way to know God is by responding to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Kraemer held that the Christian Gospel is not

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.160.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.159-160.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.161-162.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.162.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.170.

adaptable to any religion. Kraemer focused on Christ as God's only full revelation of himself. He argued that God's revelation occurs in many ways and in many places, but it can only be interpreted "correctly" in light of the definitive revelation of God in Christ. He emphasized "God has revealed the way, and the truth and the life in Jesus Christ and wills this to be known throughout the world."<sup>21</sup>

According to Kraemer Hinduism is "absolutely incompatible" with Christianity. In this theological framework, Christianity is not the fulfillment of other religions; rather Christ represents judgment upon all religions. This theological discontinuity between Hinduism and Gospel provides a framework of religious confrontation that seeks to displace other religions and "bring them under the dominion of Christ."<sup>22</sup>

## 6.2 Indian Pentecostal encounter with theology of religious pluralism

### 6.2.0 Brief overview of Indian Pentecostalism and influence from Kerala

Indigenous Pentecostalism in Kerala first emerged within the Dalit Community and subsequently spread to the Syrian Christian community. One of the main reasons for Dalit preference to the Pentecostal faith was that while mainline Churches discriminated people based on their caste origins, the Pentecostal movement endorsed a message of millennial equality. Pentecostalism, therefore, provided an alternative ecclesiastical system that recognized the oneness in the body of Christ.

Additionally, the Pentecost-like revival affected the Orthodox churches. The Syrian spiritual awakening influenced the Syrian Community primarily as a protest against the hegemony of the Church. This spiritual uprising was not accepted by the hierarchy of the Church and therefore had to become an independent movement. Those that identified with this experience brought their administrative and organizational skills and started an alternative congregational Church.

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<sup>21</sup> Kraemer, H., *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, (The Edinburgh House: Edinburgh), 1938, p.107.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.377.

The congregational activities by Syrian Pentecostals were strengthened through the support of foreign missionaries. One of the leading American missionaries in this Pentecostal movement was Robert F. Cook. His connection with the Assembly of God, U.S.A. provided financial assistance. He worked with native Syrian Pentecostals like K. E. Abraham, a pioneer in Pentecostal movement in Kerala. Together they formed the Pentecostal Church *Malankara Pentecostu Saba* on September 06, 1926 at Mazhukkir.<sup>23</sup> However the strong national sentiment and skepticism of foreign domination enabled K. E. Abraham to start his own independent mission. Consequently, the *India Pentecostal Church of God* was formed in 1934, currently the largest Pentecostal Church in India.<sup>24</sup>

Kerala Pentecostals are mission oriented. According to the 1990 statistics, “out of the fifty seven Pentecostal charismatic missionary movements, twenty nine are from the Kerala Pentecostal Churches.”<sup>25</sup> Kerala Pentecostals are actively participating in training and sending native missionaries to different parts of India.<sup>26</sup> It is fair to conclude, therefore, that Kerala Pentecostals played an important role in the history of Indian Pentecostalism. Pentecostals in Kerala with indigenous leadership provided an infrastructure for growth.

### 6.2.1 The exclusive approach to religious pluralism

When it comes to dealing with the presence of God in the life of people of other faiths, majority of Indian Pentecostals withdraw into a theological ghetto that recognizes no positive values in other religions. Other religions are seen at best, human efforts toward salvation and never the activity of divine grace. Indian Pentecostals consistently argue that God has indeed taken the initiative and revealed himself only in Jesus Christ. K. B. Benjamin, a Diaspora Indian Pentecostal living in the United States, suggests that non-Christian religions are human searches for God while the Christian Gospel portrays God’s search for humanity. Therefore Christ is the one and only divine self-disclosure

<sup>23</sup> Das, Y., An Evaluation of the History of Pentecostal Dalits in Kerala (Th.M. thesis, South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore), 2001, p.71.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.75.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



through which God can fully be known.<sup>27</sup> Biblical passages such as Acts 4:12, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by whom we must be saved,” are often recited to argue the case that the requirement of salvation through Jesus Christ is universal.

Furthermore, there is no sense that Christianity should build upon Hinduism. On the contrary, Christianity radically displaces Hindu traditions. In this understanding, there is no room for the notions of continuity and fulfillment. This Indian Pentecostal view of other religions corresponds close to Barth’s and Kraemer’s view of other religions that was outlined in previous sections.

The principal concern for Pentecostals is to provide an answer to religious pluralism from within the parameters of the Bible and the theological perspective of God’s revelation in Christ. In other words, other religions are measured against Christ. Therefore, among many Indian Pentecostals, there is a continuous suspicion of other religions and their religious narratives. They anchor their arguments on II Corinthians 11:14 “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

Indian Pentecostals reject any interpretation that may reduce the understanding of Christ to a mere *avatar*. Referring to passages such as John 3:16 “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,” the argument is made that God’s universal salvific will has a particular plan for the salvation of humanity. This plan, and the only plan, is the pre-ordained sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. In other words, in the redemptive plan of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ must be explicitly stated by those who want to be saved.

Indian Pentecostals interpret Jesus Christ’s incarnation as a singular occurrence that materialized once and for all times in contrast to Hindu avatars that are temporary and continuous. The contrast between Christ and avatar is sharply drawn in the sense that the Hindu avatars after achieving their purpose, left this world and returned to the Brahma (Godhead), whereas, Jesus Christ after the death and resurrection was not absorbed back

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, K.B., “Are all religions the same?” *Pentecostal Youth Fellowship of America- Souvenir*, (P.Y.F.A.: New York), 1997, p.65.



into Godhead abandoning his human nature. Instead He remains a distinct person of the Triune Godhead. Thus, Pentecostals in India argue for a unique revelation in Jesus Christ that is a necessary condition for salvation.

### 6.2.2 Thomas V. Ambumkayathu- Contextualizing the Christian message for Evangelism

While majority of Indian Pentecostals stand within the exclusive tradition of theology of religion, there is evidence of a theology that explores the much more inclusive potential of classical logos theology. One such Indian Pentecostal scholar who wants to communicate the Gospel by building a bridge between Hinduism and Christianity is Thomas V. Ambumkayathu. He is the director and chief editor of *Pilgrim's Vision*, an interdenominational, international evangelistic ministry. He is currently pursuing a PhD in inter-religious /intercultural evangelism at Temple University and Fuller Theological Seminary. His article "Evangelism in the second axial period"<sup>28</sup> was written as part of his taught PhD studies under the supervision of Leonard Swidler, an expert on inter-religious dialogue at the Temple University.

While most Pentecostals are suspicious of intra-Church dialogue, Ambumkayathu currently living in the United States actively engages in developing a positive relationship between Pentecostals and other Christians. He reminds Pentecostals that on the day of Pentecost when the various people gathered in Jerusalem were "amazed and perplexed" to hear in their own tongues "the mighty works of God,"<sup>29</sup> the Holy Spirit was present among them all without exception, and the fragmentation of humanity was overcome. On this basis he argues Pentecostals to embrace the unity of all believers through the actions of the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Ambumkayathu extends this positive engagement with other Christians to people of other faiths. He adopts Ewert Cousins term "second axial Period" to represent contemporary global consciousness that is "ascribed to the drastic improvement in science, technology,

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<sup>28</sup> Ambumkayathu, T., "Evangelism in the Second Axial period," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 33/3, Summer 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 2:11.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview, Summer 2000.

communications, increased worldwide travel, and migration.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, quoting Leonard Swindler, Ambumkayathu argues that in this period no individual or community can ignore another. “Nothing exists in isolation; the relationship of one thing to another is essential to both.”<sup>32</sup> This new dimension has ushered in “dialogue” as the language to represent the communication between different cultural, ideological or religious partners. In this dialogue:

Partners meet each other in mutual respect. Both partners come prepared to share, as well as to learn from each other. They should be ready to change any misconceptions about one another and be eager to appreciate the values of the other.<sup>33</sup>

He draws attention to two challenges that the traditional method of evangelism will encounter in the “second axial period.” The first challenge is the method of evangelism. In the traditional Pentecostal concept of evangelism everyone outside the Christian faith is totally lost and in darkness. This results in a monologue approach that views Christian claims as absolute. According to Ambumkayathu when missionaries attempted to be open and learn from other religious traditions, “it was for the purpose of sharpening his or her evangelistic tools in order to present the Christian message more effectively.”<sup>34</sup>

In this context, Ambumkayathu recommends a paradigm shift in Christian evangelism from its traditional “monologue” and “exclusive” perspective to a contemporary one that takes seriously the current developments and a method that is “more sensitive and open.”

Such a sensitivity and openness is necessary not only to reduce hostility between different religious groups but also to understand the full revelation of God in the world and to fulfill the ultimate divine purpose for humanity.<sup>35</sup>

This does not mean that Ambumkayathu is willing to abandon Christian evangelism. In fact, he sees evangelism as an important activity in the “second axial period.”<sup>36</sup> He

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.345.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.346.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.345.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.347.

accepts that, in the Christian Pentecostal tradition evangelism requires conversion. If the evangelistic activities did not produce religious conversion then such efforts were regarded as “ineffective.” This objective “always stressed conversion and left no room for cultivation; it demanded commitment and provided no room for mutual dialogue.”<sup>37</sup> Evangelism then defined in the “second axial period” is:

The unselfish, divine love that has been poured out into one’s life- through the life, death, and resurrection experience of Jesus Christ- that persuades one to invite others into the eternal life in which one already participates.<sup>38</sup>

Ambumkayathu seems to agree with Kraemer in terms of being highly critical of missionary superiority and the need for a humble encounter between Christians and people of other faiths. The task of an evangelist is to witness the Christian message in humility with compassion and love. He argues that “the Christian message should not be conveyed with an arrogance that assumes the whole package of spiritual mystery and that others are totally lost.”<sup>39</sup> Thus the goal of evangelism is not to draw people to a denominational Church but to God. God is active and communicating with humanity throughout human history. Therefore, “if approached properly, the existence of various religious traditions and ideologies can become an important source of mutual fecundity.”<sup>40</sup>

Ambumkayathu argues that Pentecostals are challenged to learn from people of other faiths. He believes that there is no culture from which the presence of Christ is absent. Therefore, “one can find the unique revelations of God and the mysterious presence of Christ in other religious traditions if one is willing to listen to what others have to share.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, in contrast to Kraemer’s understanding of Biblical realism, Ambumkayathu argues if Christians claim that only their religious traditions receive authentic religious experience, then according to him, “they will be contradicting themselves by keeping the First Testament [Old Testament] in their Bibles as divinely inspired writings.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.348.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.349.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.351.

If another religion, Judaism, can be accepted as a religion that has received God's revelation, the only reason that other religions could not be seen on the same level is due to the lack of substantial knowledge from within those religions.<sup>43</sup>

While he is sympathetic to the pluralist's view of the economy of God's salvation present in other religious traditions through the grace and love of God, Ambumkayathu does not go so far as to embrace this position. He insists that that "Christian evangelists will not be faithful to their own consciousness, if they speak of God's revelation bypassing Jesus Christ, who is the center of their own spiritual experience."<sup>44</sup> On this basis, however, he tries to develop an approach that is "rooted in Jesus Christ and, at the same time, open to listen and learn from other beliefs."<sup>45</sup> He states the goal of evangelist as follows: "while maintaining the centrality of Jesus Christ in his or her own Christian tradition, the task of the evangelist ....is to unveil the Christ (Logos) in other traditions."<sup>46</sup> However, in order to discover Christ in other religions, the task is to provide "theological and practical bridges from within his or her particular encounters with other religions."<sup>47</sup>

In order to establish this "bridge" Ambumkayathu searches for any resemblances the Christian faith may have to Hinduism. One fertile common ground between Hinduism and Christianity is the concept of love.<sup>48</sup> He observes that in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "love" is the "most important moral quality of God."<sup>49</sup> This love of God witnessed in Hinduism is the result of the "Logos in Hinduism."<sup>50</sup> He sees this as a clear bridge where evangelists can connect with Hinduism because in Jesus Christ, a Christian witnesses the essence of God's love. However, this "Logos in Hinduism, should be unveiled and be bridged with the historical manifestation of the divine love, Jesus Christ in Christianity...."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.352.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.353.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.355.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Another point at which a relationship can be established is in the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>52</sup> He refers to Panikkar's attempts to develop a Christian theology of the Trinity in relation to non-Christian religions and Keshab Chandra Sen's use of the Hindu concept of *Saccidananda* in relation to Christian Trinity as a possible ways to connect with other religious traditions.<sup>53</sup> While he is aware of these contextual approaches, Ambumkayathu does not build on these foundations.

It is very difficult to see how evangelism in the "second axial period" differs from the classical method and objective of evangelism which Ambumkayathu tries to abandon. Ultimately, these connecting points serve to "unveil" the *Logos* in Hinduism. This privileged reading is in danger of patronizing the Hindu devotees. In the "dialogue" that Ambumkayathu is proposing, a Christian dictates how other religious traditions should be read. The purpose of the dialogue is not to learn what God is doing in other faith communities but to discover the *Logos* in Hinduism. Dialogue in this context, then becomes a medium for the proclamation of the Christian message.

Abumkayathu's goal is to demonstrate that through sympathetic understanding of Hinduism, Indian Pentecostals will be able to be more effective in Christian evangelism. In other words, he is not necessarily denying the values that are available within a religious tradition but rather highlighting the centrality of God's self-revelation.

In summary, Ambumkayathu boldly raises the issue of Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism among Pentecostals with the goal of wanting to extend a dialogue with other Christians not in Pentecostal tradition and other religions. His motivation is the "second axial Period" where there is no alternative but to take this route.

Theologically, Ambumkayathu's argument awaits mature elaboration, but seems to be mainly on his adoption of classical logos theology which sees Christ as the incarnation of logos present through all creation, and present therefore within the human experience of Hindus in their relation with Brahman.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.356.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Secondly, Ambumkayathu does emphasize the importance of Pentecost in terms of the outpouring of the Spirit to all who gathered in Jerusalem as the justification of Pentecostal dialogue with other Christians, but does not extend this to people of other faiths. He acknowledges, but does not develop, the potential of a Trinitarian approach to other religions, which would give emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit as well as the universal presence of the logos. His interest lies in discerning Christ in Dalit religious experiences rather than in *Advaita* tradition. Therefore in interpreting Ambumkayathu's writing, it is clear that people- focus makes him look away from *Vedanta* tradition and disposes him more to the Dalit experience.

### 6.2.3 Joseph Padinjarekara- fulfillment approach

With Joseph Padinjarekara, we have a person who likes Ambumkayathu, is seeking to stand out of exclusive tradition of Pentecostal theology and explore more open relationship with Hindu religions. Padinjarekara also moves along the trajectory of a *logos* Christology, but applies it more in a fulfillment direction than does Ambumkayathu. Joseph Padinjarekara engages with Vedic scriptures and attempts to develop a theology based on fulfillment approach - particularly the concept of *Prajapati* as the shadow of Christ.

Chapter Two of this thesis examined Banerjea, an Indian Christian theologian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who pioneered a new approach to the Christian understanding of Hinduism through interpreting the self- sacrifice of *Prajapati* as fulfilled in Christ. Padinjarekara popularizes this theological approach among Indian Pentecostals, and has influenced many subsequent Indian Pentecostal writers. Thomas Ambumkayathu, for example, comments, "There is an obvious resemblance of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Vedic revelation of the Lord Ishvara or Purusha or *Prajapati*." <sup>54</sup>

Professor T.C. Mathew writing an "Exposition" of Padinjarekara's *Christ in Ancient Vedas*<sup>55</sup> comments, this publication "is a milestone in the history of Cross Cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.354.

<sup>55</sup> Mathew, T.C., "Exposition," Joseph Padinjarekara, *Christ in Ancient Vedas*, (Welch Publishing Company Inc.: Burlington Ont. Canada), 1991.



Evangelism.”<sup>56</sup> Rev. P.A.V. Sam, State overseer, Church of God in India comments, “the author (Padinjarekara) has made some in-depth study on ancient Vedic literature and ... has been used of God to open the eyes of many Hindus to see Christ as the real Prajapati (the Lord of all) who gave Himself in sacrifice which is also mentioned in the Vedas.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, during many evangelistic operations such as public meetings, conventions, literature publications, the theme of Christ in the ancient Vedas became the core of the Indian Pentecostal message.

Mircea Eliade in *A History of Religious Ideas*, describes *Prajapati* as belonging to the myth-ritual discourses.<sup>58</sup> *Prajapati* as the Lord of creatures is near to the cosmic great gods found in *the Nasadiya*, *the Creation Hymn* and *the Unknown God, the Golden Embryo*.<sup>59</sup> In the beginning *Prajapati* was the “nonmanifested Unity-totality, a purely spiritual presence.”<sup>60</sup> But desire (*kama*) incited *Prajapati* to multiply and reproduce himself. He first created the Brahman, the threefold knowledge or the three Vedas then he created the waters from the Word. Desiring to reproduce himself by the Waters, *Prajapati* penetrated them and an egg developed, whose shell became the earth. After this the gods were created to people the heavens and the *Asuras* to people the earth. The *Purusa-Sukta* or *the Hymn of Man* describes *Prajapati* and his Sacrifice.<sup>61</sup> This *Purusa* is not an ordinary human being. *The Katha Upanishad* describes the greatness of *Purusa* as “The whole universe comes from him and his life burns through the whole universe. In his power is the majesty of thunder. Those who know him have found immortality.”<sup>62</sup> Padinjarekara recognizes the general revelation of God in all of creation. According to him, God wishes all people to be in relationship with Him, even though not all know Christ. This means that God’s revelation must be available to all people in all ethnic communities. Padinjarekara quotes various biblical passages such as Psalm 34:29 “He is near to everyone who comes to him with an open heart” to support the position that God revealed Himself to all nations. Padinjarekara also refers to Matthew 2:2 where the wise

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.30.

<sup>57</sup> Sam, P.A.V., “Appreciation,” op. cit., p.27.

<sup>58</sup> Eliade, M., *A History of Religious ideas Vol. I*, (Chicago University Press: Chicago) 1978, pp.227-228.

<sup>59</sup> O’Flaherty, W. D. (translation), *The Rig Veda*, (The Penguin Books: New York), 1981, pp. 23-28.

<sup>60</sup> Eliade, M., op. cit., p.229

<sup>61</sup> O’Flaherty, W. D., op. cit., p.33.

<sup>62</sup> Mascaro, J., (translation), *The Upanishads*, (The Penguin Books: New York), 1965, p.65.



men from the East came to worship Jesus, and asks the question if God hid the mystery of Christ from all nations then how did the wise men see the star in the East.<sup>63</sup>

This general revelation of God in the entire world means that God's revelation is not only available to all people but can be discovered in non-Christian religious scriptures.

However, he does not consider the Vedic literatures as "equal" even though "they are parallel to the Bible." In *Gospel for India in Indian Cups*, Padinjarekara unequivocally responds to criticism from certain Pentecostal circles to clarify his position of the relationship between the Vedas and the Bible. He replies: "I want to make it clear that I do not consider that Vedic literature is equal to the Holy Bible,"<sup>64</sup> and goes on to say: "the sixty six books of the holy Bible are the only infallible and perfect revelation of God. All other religious books must be brought under the microscope of this perfect revelation."<sup>65</sup>

He does not consider Christianity and Hinduism to be equal or that they are particular representations of a common encounter with God. For Padinjarekara, Christ has an exclusive status that is not found in other religious traditions. Therefore, he does not believe that revelations in other religious traditions provide similar or the same saving grace that is offered in the Christian tradition.

In the Indian context, God has revealed himself through the Man sacrifice who is the *Puruskata*. For Indians, Padinjarekara writes, "His wonderful creation, the incredible universe filled with 100 billion stars of the galaxy or Milky Way, witnesses every moment to the sacrificial love of Purusha."<sup>66</sup> He draws on the analogy of a child recognizing his/her mother: "as a child has an inborn tendency to recognize his father and mother from his birth every one of us has a place in our soul to recognize the language of the Man-Purusha- who sacrificed himself for our creation and redemption."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Padinjarekara, J., *Christ in Ancient Vedas*, (Welch Publishing Company Inc.: Burlington Ont. Canada), 1991, pp.200-201.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.198.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

These “glimpses of truth” or “nuggets of truth” deposited in other religions are discerned through the one “true” revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>68</sup> Padinjarekara maintains that revelations in the Vedic scriptures are “truthful” in so far as they do not contradict the normative revelation of Jesus Christ. Padinjarekara distinguishes between *Prajapati* and other incarnations of Brahman in that the *Prajapati* is not one among many gods of Hinduism. He does not see *Prajapati* like *Krishna* or *Rama*. For him, *Prajapati* “represents the one and the only God who is the Lord of all creation.”<sup>69</sup>

For Padinjarekara sacrifice is an essential part of both Hinduism and Christianity. In *Christ in the Ancient Vedas*, Padinjarekara starts with examining the idea of sacrifice in the Hindu concept of *Prajapati* and in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. After examining these religious traditions, he concludes that the supreme sacrifice in the Vedas offered by *Prajapati* is a prophetic foreshadow of Jesus Christ.

Padinjarekara recognizes that there are different perceptions of the *Prajapati* in the Vedas. He writes:

We encounter all sorts of ideas when we go through Vedic literature. We may even see several other Vedic gods named prajapathi and their stories. The characters of these prajapathis are totally different from the divine character of the original prajapathi who is the Lord of all.<sup>70</sup>

However, Padinjarekara does not provide any criteria by which he makes the distinction between “*Prajapati*” and “original *Prajapati*.”

According to Padinjarekara, the benefit of the *Prajapati* sacrifice is to lead people to the Truth.<sup>71</sup> Padinjarekara observes important features of the *Prajapati* which are fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. Padinjarekara starts with the concept of the *Niskalanka Purusa* or sinless man.<sup>72</sup> The sacrificial person should be blameless and since Jesus was a sinless person this characteristic is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Padinjarekara assumes the concept of sin is similar in both Hinduism and Christianity.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pp.199-200.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.204.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.203.

<sup>71</sup> Katho Upanishad, p.60.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p.83.

Another characteristic is the sacrificial victim should be rejected by his own people.<sup>73</sup> “The sacrificial animal should be rejected by its father, mother, brother, sister and friends.”<sup>74</sup> This is fulfilled in Jesus because “He came to that which was his own, and His own did not receive Him.”<sup>75</sup> (John 1:11)

The blood of the sacrificial person<sup>76</sup> becomes another characteristic feature of *Prajapati* that was fulfilled in Christ. While the shedding of blood is essential to sacrifice in the Christian tradition, Padinjarekara cannot find a parallel reading in the Rig Veda. However, he writes, “even though there is no direct verse indicating bloodshed in the Sacrifice of Man in the *Purusasukta*, it is obvious that there was bloodshed and without it, it would have been impossible to complete the sacrifice.”<sup>77</sup> In order to show that *Prajapati* shed blood, he quotes a passage from *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* “there we see that blood was flowing from Him just like sap oozes from the cut tree”<sup>78</sup> which was fulfilled in Jesus through his shedding of blood on the cross.<sup>79</sup> Using similar hermeneutical style, Padinjarekara argues that other characteristics of *Prajapati* are also fulfilled in Christ such as the characteristic of the sacrificial victim of the *Prajapati* returns to life after the sacrifice.<sup>80</sup>

While some church leaders endorsed Padinjarekara’s reading of the Vedic literature and recognized great cross-cultural evangelistic benefits, there were others who were very critical of this approach. K. B. Benjamin, for example, writes: “the various sacrifices mentioned in Hinduism have no connection with the sacrifice of the Son of God.”<sup>81</sup> T.S. Balan wrote a book refuting Padinjarekara’s claim in *Christ is not Prajapati*, in which his main argument comes out of his own conversion experience. As a former Hindu he had read Vedic scriptures many times, but did not see Christ in them.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, he argues that just because there are similarities between the concept of *Prajapati* and Christ

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.95.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.110.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Padinjarekara, J., op. cit., pp.110-111.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp.117-35.

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, K.B., op. cit., p.65.

<sup>82</sup> Balan, T. S., *Prajapathi is not Christ*, (World revival Prayer Fellowship: Canada), 1996, p. 55.

does not necessarily mean they are the same.<sup>83</sup> This argument is in line with that of Kraemer's understanding of 'Biblical realism.' However, he goes beyond scholarly criticism based on the evidence of Padinjarekara's writings to personal character assassination. Unfortunately, instead of using this opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue on the contemporary issues in Indian Pentecostal missions, many Pentecostal writers are personally attacking those people who do not agree with their personal approach to Christian mission in the name of defending the Christian truth.

In the engagement with other religious traditions, the guiding issue for Padinjarekara is the nature of God's work among the people of other religions. In answering this, he does not simply dismiss the other religious traditions simply in negative terms. In this respect his theological approach to Hinduism was to enter into a dialogue with Vedic scriptures in order to re-interpret the Christian theology in India. Padinjarekara differs from Ambumkayathu in that he consciously locates this in the *Prajapati* tradition.

Padinjarekara applies exclusively the role of *Prajapati*. In doing so, appears less concerned to allow the Vedic text to speak for itself and discern the degree to which a Christian might discover Christ within *Vedas* than to impose a particular understanding of Christ upon the *Vedas*. In contrast to Ambumkayathu, it is evident that he does not give any consideration to Christ outside the Vedic tradition, i.e. in the religious experiences of Dalit people.

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that Indian Pentecostal theology of religion demonstrates two approaches that are in tension with each other. The advocates of the discontinuity position treat other religions from an exclusivist position and see no value in their traditions. The second Indian Pentecostal theology of religion model demonstrates a more nuanced approach to other religions. Ambumkayathu adopts a logos theology which sees Christ as the incarnation of logos present throughout creation and Padinjarekara, who is more selective of elements within Hinduism, wants to transform Hinduism by seeing certain of its elements being fulfilled in Christ.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

## Other Pentecostal discourses on religious pluralism

The neglect in engaging with the non-Christian religious traditions is a theological problem for Indian Pentecostals. However, there are number of non-Indian Pentecostals who have engaged in Pentecostal reflection on religious pluralism. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, a former Pentecostal missionary and now associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, in "Toward a Pneumatological theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry,"<sup>84</sup> accurately summarizes the engagement of Pentecostals with other religions as:

Traditionally Pentecostals and many Charismatics have been exclusivists, but in the last two decades or so there have been several theologically-noteworthy attempts to develop a Pentecostal-Charismatic theology of religions that moves towards a more inclusivist view.<sup>85</sup>

According to him, the latter group is concerned about the missiological implications of Pentecostal doctrine and experience of the Spirit.<sup>86</sup>

## Allan Anderson: Anthropological Approach

Alan Anderson, who was raised in a missionary family in Zimbabwe and Zambia, now at the University of Birmingham goes beyond the Christological approach of Indian Pentecostals to an anthropological analysis of traditional religion. His book, *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context*,<sup>87</sup> was a master's thesis written under the supervision of Inus Daneel, an expert on the African independent churches. Anderson's writing attempts to explore what it means for Pentecostal thought to recognize truth in other religious traditions and discern the presence and activity of the Spirit.

Anderson gives three reasons for the Pentecostal expressions of the Spirit as providing positive channels toward a viable African Christianity. The first reason is the deficiency

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<sup>84</sup> Karkkainen, V-M., "Toward a Pneumatological theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry," in *International Review of Mission*, XC1/361, 2002.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.188.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, A., *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an Asian Context*, (University of South Africa: Pretoria) 1991.

in western Pneumatology.<sup>88</sup> The western Pneumatological interpretation suffers from a dualistic rationalization that he argues, separates spiritual and material world. This dualistic approach fails to meet the context need of the African for the “divine involvement” in their daily activities. African Pentecostalism discovered that the Biblical account of the Holy Spirit was not “detached and uninvolved,” but was a manifesting reality of God through the Spirit.<sup>89</sup> There is an understanding that the Spirit “pervades all life, and not just the ‘spiritual’ part of it,” which accords more holistically with the African world-view.<sup>90</sup>

Secondly, the emphasis on Spiritual power by the Pentecostals connects with the African religious experience.<sup>91</sup> According to Anderson, “Power, if coming from God and bestowed on people must be personal, and not some vague idea of ‘vital force’.”<sup>92</sup> The demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit to meet concrete human needs such as sickness and other affliction is an important mark of African religious world-view. However, the difference is that the Anderson emphasis is on a personal character of divine revelation in contrast to the impersonal and manipulative “life-forces” of African religions. Furthermore, the demonstration of God’s power through his Spirit over the evil forces will show that the Holy Spirit can meet existential needs in the African spirit world. Anderson suggests, “the African needs to discover in the milieu of Africa that the Christian God is indeed all-powerful; and this omnipotent God manifests his presence through the Holy Spirit working graciously and actively in the Church.”<sup>93</sup>

Lastly, Anderson recognizes the African spirit world and the realities of spiritual forces such as ancestors.<sup>94</sup> This Spirit world according to Anderson is essential to tribal traditions. It “pervades the whole of life. The same essential reality permeates everywhere and is experienced rather than verbalized.”<sup>95</sup> Through his analysis of traditional religion, Anderson sees evidence of real life-changing experience of spiritual

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p.101

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.101.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p.104.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p.72.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.79.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.75.



universe. Anderson suggests that a contextualization of Christianity in Africa can take place only in so far as it will engage with the spirit world in traditional African thought.

Anderson sees an interaction of Pentecostalism with African spirituality as helping people to recover elements in their culture that provide answers to the needs of the people. It is also at the heart of the Pentecostal experience and world-view. In this regard, Anderson is more sympathetic to African religions than other Pentecostal theologians and points to the Independent Churches “as the ‘raw material’ for a contextual theology in Africa” because “the power of the Holy Spirit liberates from the oppression of both the traditional spirit world, and Western ‘colonial’ forms of Christianity.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, Anderson sees that Pentecostals throughout Africa have found in their context, “acceptable alternatives” to the “intellectualized gospel” that was mostly the legacy of foreign missionaries.

The approach demonstrated by Anderson engages with the African traditional religions in a way Indian Pentecostals have yet to explore. Allan Anderson’s anthropological approach can benefit Indian Pentecostals as a means of discerning how spiritual activity takes place in other religion; he gives Pentecostals a way of understanding human apprehension of Indian religiosity of dreams, healings and visions. Anderson’s work represents an attempt to correlate Biblical concepts with “spiritual” manifestations of African traditional religions. In this respect, there is a concern for retaining continuity between the Christian message and popular religiosity. These perspectives can provide a foundation in developing an Indian Pentecostal theology of religions.

## Jean-Jacques Suurmond: Theological

Dutch Reformed Pentecostal Jean-Jacques Suurmond is another non-Indian Pentecostal whose theology advances an understanding of the universal presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. In Suurmond’s approach to religious pluralism, there is a shift from an anthropological approach to a theological approach along a theo-centric track. For Suurmond, to recognize the universal presence and activity of the Spirit is to grant that signs of the spirit should also be available everywhere. According to him, non-Christian

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.125.



religions “are not without gifts of grace.”<sup>97</sup> For Suurmond then religious traditions are an important category to understand our common humanity.

He argues that the “baptism with the Word and the Spirit” are not limited to those who know Christ. “The Pentecost play of Word and Spirit also makes possible outside Christianity charismatic encounters which have an up-building and transforming power, expressions of grace in which people live by their true self and become an unsuspected gift.”<sup>98</sup>

He suggests that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the relationship between human beings as found in Acts 2:16 -20 and Romans 5:1-11 are helpful for inter-religious dialogue.<sup>99</sup> “Certainly the Pentecost event of the outpouring of Christ’s Word and Spirit on ‘every living creature’ is regarded as a decisive new change in the relationship between God and the world and thus also in the relationship between human beings.”<sup>100</sup> This is characterized in the life of love and compassion to others. The goal of the Church is to recognize and participate in the reconciling work of God through the Son and the charismatic celebration of the Spirit.<sup>101</sup> This leads Surmond to suggest, in the end what is important is “the one reality which the great religions all serve and worship. Christ’s word and Spirit give everyone power within their own cultures and religions to be liberated from the false self and take the way to God’s kingdom.”<sup>102</sup> In this respect his theological approach to religious pluralism was to enter into a dialogue with other religions in order to re-interpret the Pentecostal Christian theology of Europe.

## Samuel Solivan: Pentecostal Liberation approach

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<sup>97</sup> Suurmond, J., *Word & Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology*, (Eerdmans Pub. Comp.: Michigan) 1994, p.199.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p.198.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.201.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.202.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p.203.

Another non-Indian Pentecostal who has interpreted the Christian faith in a religiously plural context is Samuel Solivan who approached the issue of religious pluralism from the perspective of liberation. Solivan's most significant work to date concerning the Holy Spirit and people of other faiths is in the article "Interreligious Dialogue: An Hispanic American Pentecostal Perspective."<sup>103</sup> He describes three primary attributes of the Holy Spirit that are pertinent to our discussion for a Pentecostal engagement with non-Christian religions.

First, the Holy Spirit's role in illuminating truth provides us with "free space" to reflect on issues pertaining to religious pluralism. This "free space" "allows for doubt, or new questions, or new answers to old questions."<sup>104</sup> Therefore, it is important to identify the Holy Spirit as illuminator and guide.

Second, Solivan believes in the prevenient workings of the Holy Spirit in every human being. It implies that the Holy Spirit works in Christians and non-Christians alike. Solivan identifies the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, as in the case of Abraham, "who without Law or prophets was recipient of saving grace."<sup>105</sup> This Pneumatological perspective, Solivan argues, "can free Pentecostals and others to engage with the type of religious dialogue that can afford the Spirit an opportunity to make known its presence in unexpected ways."<sup>106</sup>

Solivan's major contribution is in providing a Pentecostal liberation framework for Christian dialogue with other religions. As majority of Pentecostals are drawn from the

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<sup>103</sup> Solivan, S., "Interreligious Dialogue: An Hispanic American Pentecostal Perspective," in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Response to Religious Pluralism*, Mark Heim (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1998A, pp.37-45. This book is a result of a study group on responses to religious pluralism set up within the working group on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A.; and of a consultation held after two years of reflection. The book sets out the approaches and attitudes of eleven different denominations to inter-religious dialogue. The emphasis of the reflection was a need to focus more on praxis in terms of social justice rather than doctrines.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p.40.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.42.

poor and marginalized, Solivan suggests, Pentecostals are open to a theological view “from below” which focuses less on “orthodoxy” than concrete transformations.<sup>107</sup>

Solivan in *The Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology*, uses the term *orthopathos* to express his understanding of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to liberate suffering and oppression into a life full of hope and promise.<sup>108</sup> He suggests that throughout history the transforming work of the Holy Spirit is witnessed in people’s lives, empowering them to overcome suffering and despair. As a result, Solivan writes: “we [Pentecostals] have known in our lives the transforming power of wholeness, justice and the peace of the Holy Spirit; we dare to work hard in hand with others for the benefit of all humanity.”<sup>109</sup> Solivan’s Pneumatology means he understands the Spirit in building “human community.” He writes, “wherever there is true community the Spirit has been at work.”<sup>110</sup> This emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives and history of the poor provides the justification for Pentecostals to engage with people of other faiths. Solivan writes these insights can

allow us to explore the variety of ways in which the human community seeks to express its longing and searching after God. A sharing of these expressions of spirituality can be informative and at times even transformative of our own models and modes of spirituality and their accompanying theological assumptions.<sup>111</sup>

As a Pentecostal theologian Samuel Solivan emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit throughout history, at work wherever community is built. Secondly, Solivan’s emphasis on Pentecostalism as a Church of the poor provides a basis for Pentecostals to engage with people of other faiths in the struggle to develop “community.” The basis for co-operation is not “truth seeking” but promoting social welfare and liberation with and for the plight of the poor.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, pp.40-41.

<sup>108</sup> Solivan, S., *The Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation*, (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield), 1998.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p.69.

<sup>110</sup> Solivan, s. op. cit., 1998A, p.42.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p.43.

## Amos Yong: Systematic Approach

Amos Yong, a United States Pentecostal pastor with Malaysian parentage has developed another rich canvas of theological engagement with religious pluralism, while pursuing a line that is very different from that of Solivan. In so doing, Yong has developed a theology based on pneumatology.<sup>112</sup>

In developing his Pneumatology, he relies on the writings of Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven*.<sup>113</sup> In this book, Cox suggests that Pentecostal spirituality is an emergence of a primal spirituality in a post-modern age, which he describes as a “recovery of primal piety.” Cox identified three dimensions of Pentecostal spirituality that is part of common popular religious traditions worldwide. They are: ecstatic speech, mystical piety, and millennial fervor. He identified these elements as “primal spirituality” whereby individuals are able to cope with personal and social changes.<sup>114</sup> In Cox’s analysis this spirituality has provided a framework to engage with other religious traditions and cultures around the world.

Taking this as a starting point Yong argues that the Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit can provide “an avenue by which a pneumatological approach to the non-Christian faiths can be constructed.”<sup>115</sup> In his book *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, Yong suggests that a Pneumatological approach to the religions can be advanced through what he calls “Pneumatological imagination,” which is “the instantiation of the divine symbol of the Holy Spirit in the human experience of the world.”<sup>116</sup> This is to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is active *within* the faith systems of non-Christian religions (whether scripture or liturgy or other aspects of a religion). God’s Spirit is the life-breath of the *imago Dei* in every human being. What this means is that all human activities are “pneumatologically mediated.” This leads Yong to conclude the religions of the world are providentially sustained by the Spirit for divine purposes.

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<sup>112</sup> Yong, A., *Discerning the Spirit (s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) 2000.

<sup>113</sup> Cox, H., *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the twenty-first Century* (London: Cassell) 1996.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, pp.99-110.

<sup>115</sup> Yong, A., op.cit., p.20.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p.312.

However, Yong recognizes the “demonic” presence of spiritual forces apostle John warns “do not believe every Spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (I John 4:1) Yong has argued that the criterion for discerning the Spirit or spirits is the appearance of Pentecostal-charismatic phenomenon (I Corinthians 12: 1-31; 14:1-40). He interprets this to mean manifestation of the phenomena associated with the Pentecostal movement. He believes there is an intrinsic connection between the experience of the Holy Spirit in terms of speaking in tongues and ecstatic religious experiences of other religious traditions. Therefore, Pentecostals need to do comparative analysis for “creative theology.” By doing so, he wants to affirm there are “other pneumatological visions” existing outside the Pentecostal tradition “and none can claim a monopoly on the Spirit’s presence, work and revelation.” While this is an ambitious project, the study raises concern over the relationship between Christology and Pneumatology. As Karkkainen observed, “...building a theology of religions on Christology alone is not the most promising way, but neither is a theology based on the Spirit at the expense of Christ.”<sup>117</sup>

It is suggested, in short, that the empirical evidence of spiritual gifts among other religious communities (Alan Anderson); theological evidence that Holy Spirit works universally (Jean-Jacques Suurmond); the emphasis on liberative justice (Samuel Solivan); and “pneumatologically mediated” relationship between the (Christian) Pentecostalist and other recipients of spiritual gifts (Amos Yong); offers an explorative dialogue for Indian Pentecostals to engage with people of other faiths.

## Conclusion

It has been the argument of this chapter that the majority of Indian Pentecostals have held to an exclusivist position with regards to engaging with people of other faiths, reflecting the thinking of Barth and Kraemer. They have little interest in expressing the Pentecostal faith in contextual ways that engage with people of other faiths in India. This gives the impression that Pentecostals are overtly dependent on western or American sources and there is little contextual reality in the needs to reflect on the contextual theology that aids the Church in its witness and mission.

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<sup>117</sup> Karkkainen, V-M., op.cit., p.193.

Alternative ways of thinking are beginning to emerge among some Indian Pentecostals who are exploring hermeneutical methods of interpreting Hindu texts from a Christian perspective. Ambumkayathu adopts classical logos theology which sees Christ as the incarnation of logos present through all creation. On the other hand, Padinjarekara applies Christian hermeneutical method to retrieve Hindu meaning. In this process, it must be stated that this is a Christian reading/interpretation of the Hindu text. A Hindu can argue that it was the Christian tradition that became the fulfillment of the writings found in the Vedic literatures since these religious narratives were recorded centuries before the Christ event. Therefore, it is not Christ in ancient Vedas but *Prajapati* in the Christian Bible that needs to be discovered. The goal for Padinjarekara is to use Hindu resources including other sacred texts for Christian evangelism.

This approach can also be criticized from a Dalit background. In Rig-Veda 10 verses 11 and 12, the sacrifice of Prajapati gave rise to the caste system. "His [Prajapati's] mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born."<sup>118</sup> Therefore, Dalits will see the *Prajapati* sacrifice as a legitimization of the caste system. Padinjarekara fails to take seriously the relation between *Prajapati* and the origin of caste system. Furthermore, those whose origin is of the lower caste are not encouraged to read Rig Veda. Therefore this approach is for a minority of people who have access to or are literate in Hindu scriptures.

An examination of the Indian Pentecostal approach to religious pluralism showed that there is no distinguishable Pentecostal ground through which Indian Pentecostals have approached the issue of religious pluralism. Some have shifted to explore religious pluralism within India in terms of a *logos* theology. In this connection, Pentecostals such as Padinjarekara and Ambumkayathu were not saying anything distinctively Pentecostal. They were Pentecostals by affiliation rather than by theological perspectives. It is to the non-Indian Pentecostals that I have turned to find more emphasis on Pentecostal insights into religious pluralism that discerns the activity of the Holy Spirit and Spirit manifestations in spiritual fruits of other religions in the indigenous religious tradition of African traditional religions, and with the liberative identification with the poor. These

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<sup>118</sup> *The Rig Veda*, op. cit., p.31.



non-Indian Pentecostal approaches to religious pluralism are offered as an encouragement to Indian Pentecostals to explore Indian realities in building their own approach to religious pluralism.

The anthropological analysis challenges Indian Pentecostals to take seriously the religious experience of people of other faiths and in particular the Dalit religious traditions in order to identify the life changing experience within Dalit religious tradition which is similar to the Pentecostal worldview. The theological proposition that God is everywhere from a Pentecostal view does not negate the fact that the evil spirits are everywhere as well. The world is not just a good place. That a battle is going on which is ignored by the Indian Christian theologians we examined in Part Two of this thesis is precisely the point of engagement of Pentecostal contribution.

Lastly, Indian Pentecostals also need to address the role of the Holy Spirit among people of other faiths. If the Holy Spirit is active in the whole world judging people and confessing God, why should the Holy Spirit abstain from the sphere of religious activities? Furthermore, if the Holy Spirit is not active in this world or other religions, how can one apprehend the truth or rays of light, as limited as they may be, in other religious traditions? Yong's pneumatological approach that recognizes the activity of the Holy Spirit beyond the Church which can be discerned through the Pentecostal phenomenon could provide Indian Pentecostals a means of exploring Indian realities to discern where the "Pentecostal phenomenon" could be identified. The challenge for Pentecostals in India then is not to argue the resemblance between Christian faith and other religions, or to argue that Hinduism is inadequate and needs fulfillment in Christ. Rather it is to discern the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Indian religious realities. This leads to grasp the vision of the Dalit religious world and Spirit's power everywhere.



## Chapter Seven

### Dalit and Pentecostal identity: A basis for an Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism

#### Introduction

This chapter is the summation of the aims and argument that shape the whole thesis: What are the bases for an Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism? The aim of this chapter is to engage the existing Indian theologies of religious pluralism as examined in the body of thesis and, building on them, indicate how an Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism could be developed.

In the previous chapter an examination of the contemporary Indian Pentecostal approach to religious pluralism showed that there is no distinguishable Pentecostal ground through which Indian Pentecostals have approached the issue of religious pluralism. This does not mean that there was no discussion on the issue of religious pluralism. There have been two important features: firstly, a Barthian/ Kraemer view of religion that states religion as human attempts to reach God. Secondly, a fulfillment approach that acknowledged other religions as “incomplete” and “preparatory” awaiting fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This chapter will attempt to go beyond these premises and identify characteristics of Pentecostalism that can be seen as rooted in the contextualized Indian realities. In doing so, the goal of this chapter is to highlight resources that would make a Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism a possibility.

What is needed in the engagement with religious pluralism in the Indian context is the Pentecostal dialogue with religious traditions of the people of lower caste origins complementing dialogue with “high” religions. Otherwise, encounters in religious pluralism will be perceived as dealing only with “high” religions and therefore powerless to deal with different cosmologies. A dialogue with the religious traditions of Dalits, this chapter will argue, provides Pentecostals with a distinct way of engaging this

issue of religious pluralism which has not been established in other Christian traditions in India. The chapter will begin by highlighting critical issues arising from contemporary discourse on religious pluralism for Indian Pentecostals. It will then engage in a dialogue with popular religions in terms of Dalit and Pentecostal identity.

## 7.1 Critical issues arising from contemporary discourses on religious pluralism for Indian Pentecostals

There have been several issues identified in Part Two of this thesis which Indian Pentecostals need to address in engaging with religious pluralism: the universal presence/ activity of God; economy of salvation; the activity of the Holy Spirit, theological value of Hindu scriptures; the Kingdom of God; and Indian Christian theology and hegemony. Far from rejecting these issues Pentecostals need to identify them as theological concerns that require attention in order to develop a Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism.

### 7.1.1 The universal presence and activity of God

One of the fundamental issues arising from the contemporary Christian engagement with religious pluralism is the presence and activity of God in the world. There is a shift from seeing the activity of God exclusively within the Church to a wider understanding of God acting outside the Church. For Samartha, God is not only active in the secular movements but also in non-Christian religions. According to Ariarajah, the revelation of God is traced back to creation itself. Ariarajah's thought on the one hand, affirms God as the source of life and sustainer of every human community. On the other hand, he establishes a foundation for all religious experiences. Since God wishes to draw all people to Himself, the Divine must be present in all world religions. As a result, all peoples have the potential of experiencing God salvifically in their own cultures.

This emphasis on the universal salvific activity of God enabled all three theologians examined in Part Two of this thesis to affirm all people as God's people. Ariarajah

insists that God of the Bible is not just for Christians but belongs to all of creation. As such all religions are the locus of God's presence and activity.

In contrast to Ariarajah's emphasis on God as God of all nations and peoples who is active in all creation from the beginning, Pentecostals have emphasized the "fall" and human rebellion against God. The universal activity of God alone is not sufficient for salvation. This dominant Pentecostal understanding compartmentalizes religions in an *a priori* judgment of truth and falsehood. Despite the human potential to worship God, human beings are unable to respond to the religious yearnings to turn toward God. It views Christianity as true and other religious traditions as false. Therefore other religions are to be replaced by Christianity. The theological problem facing Pentecostals is that if one sees God working in the whole world, then why should this God abstain from having an active role in non-Christian faiths? However, if God is not active in the world, then how does one take account of the truths (limited though they may be) in other religious traditions?

Emil Brunner argued that through general revelation it is possible for human beings to come to know God apart from Biblical revelation. Brunner argued affirmatively in *Revelation and Reason*<sup>1</sup> that through creation God's disclosure is available to all people because God "has not left Himself without a witness among them." Therefore, Paul is able to speak of the Athenians as worshipping "an unknown God."<sup>2</sup> God's disclosure through creation does not mean that revelation is something that took place long ago "and has now been relegated to the far-distant, but it is present reality." As such, behind every religion is "the testimony of the Creator-God."<sup>3</sup> However, Brunner argues that the revelation of God must go hand in hand with the doctrine of original sin. This means that religion is the "product" of human's "sinful blindness."<sup>4</sup> So all religions, including Christianity are the "product" of these two factors and it is in the divine revelation of

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, E, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia), 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, E, "Revelation and Reason," *Attitudes Toward Other Religions*, Thomas, Owen C. (ed), (SCM Press: London), 1969, p.120.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.121.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.122.

Jesus Christ that both fulfilment of religion and the judgment of religion are found.<sup>5</sup> This is a major problem for Pentecostals like Padinjarekara because he views Christianity as the absolute and exclusive truth. Other religions are at best considered as preparations for Christ. This evaluation of other religious traditions is a barrier to Pentecostals acknowledging the salvific self revelation of God in all cultures.

### 7.1.2 The economy of salvation

The universal presence of God leads Pentecostals to grapple with the purpose of God's activity in this world. God's activity must include the entire moral, political, social and religious life of a person through which God is making Himself known to all people. It has been stated clearly by Ariarajah that God as the sovereign creator and sustainer of the world is the same to all people and that God saves people in and through other religions.

All three theologians examined in Part Two highlighted religious experiences of different faith communities as an authentic encounter with the Divine. God's saving grace is not limited to the Church, but is offered to persons of all faith traditions. This raised the issue of the relationship between God's saving presence in all cultures, and the Christian understanding of the salvific event which occurred in Christ. Ariarajah argued that while Christians see Christ as the "unique" revelation of God, it cannot be assumed that there is no salvation apart from an explicit faith in Christ. In this regard, Samartha also argued the need to "revise" the explicit commitment to Jesus Christ as the only norm for salvation. Like Ariarajah, Samartha laid emphasis on the redemptive activity of God towards all humankind. Pentecostals therefore need to address the question of what is the role of other religions in God's economy of salvation.

In Chapter Five Ariarajah argued that world religions are not sinful but different human perceptions of the same divine reality. As such he has a more nuanced understanding of religion and the economy of salvation within each religion than Pentecostals. As we saw in Chapter Six Ambumkayathu wants to employ different methods of evangelism

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.129.

because he does not see any salvific values in world religions. He lays his emphasis on the sinful rebellion against God. Similarly Padinjarekara, who looked at Hinduism more closely than other Pentecostals, argued that ultimately it stands in discontinuity with the Christian Gospel.

In contrast Ariarajah acknowledges religions as having the possibility of rebelling against, as well as responding to, God's love. The challenge therefore is to discern the activity of God that brings about the economy of salvation in other religions. Rayan in Chapter Four argued that all world religions are within the goal of salvation to the degree that religions work towards liberating the poor. Samartha affirmed the presence of the Holy Spirit can be discerned where there is life, truth and gifts of the Spirit. God can, therefore, be identified as being present in that particular religious tradition.

Pentecostals hold firm to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as a real event that has a historical outcome in terms of salvation without which salvation is not possible. However, they also believe in the continuous activity of the Spirit. Even though it is true that the Truth is "in the universe itself," it means nothing to a person unless he/she has been told of this truth and what this means. In other words, human beings do not inherently possess this knowledge; it becomes a reality only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is the Holy Spirit that leads people to the Truth. In this connection, the Orthodox theologian George Khodr's pneumatological approach to people of other faiths could be a window for Pentecostals to build their own perspective on religious pluralism. For Khodr it is not only that the Spirit of God is everywhere, but that the Spirit makes Christ present. It is on these pneumatological grounds that Khodr insists that "the freedom of God is such that He can raise up prophets outside the sociological confines of the New Israel just as He raised them up outside the confine of the Old Israel."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Khodr, G., "Christianity in a Pluralist World: the Economy of the Holy Spirit," *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 23, January- December 1971, p.304

The pneumato- centric approach to the theology of religious pluralism provides an emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit and thus escapes the limitations of Christo-centric and Theo-centric models. In engaging with religious pluralism, Samartha argued that the Holy Spirit is within all religions. For Rayan, God's Spirit is breaking into history from outside. However, both men attempt to identify any movement towards liberation as a movement of the Spirit.

In order to discern the activity of the Spirit in the world, Samartha put forward the criteria of the "fruits of the Spirit" to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in other religions. Gavin D'Costa, a Catholic theologian of Indian heritage who lectures at the University of Bristol proposes a similar argument in his book *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*.<sup>7</sup> D'Costa argues that wherever the fruits of the Spirit are found – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (Galatians 5:22) - the Spirit of God is present. So discerning the Spirit's work in other religions is through recognizing "Christ-like" values among them.

However, the reality of a spirit-world which is an important feature of the religious landscape of India is not taken into consideration by the three theologians examined in Part Two of this thesis. It is ignored in favor of a generalized view of the one universal Spirit. While Rayan attempts to develop "spirituality for combat" through liberation theology, he does not articulate this in terms of "spirits." Samartha refers to the plurality of spirits even though as Kim argues "it is difficult to see what room there is for this [spirits] within the 'unitive vision' of *Advaita* tradition."<sup>8</sup> In so doing there is a lack of understanding the complexity of plurality of spirits.

However, Pentecostals have an insight into this spirit-world that the above theologians do not. As Kim argues, "other forms of Indian pneumatology may yet appear from

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<sup>7</sup> Gavin D'Costa *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark,) 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, K., *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies*, (ISPCK: New Delhi), 2003, p.232.

Pentecostal-Charismatic sources... because they interpret the Holy Spirit against a background of many spirits or within the matrix of the spirit-world.”<sup>9</sup> As will become clear, the Pentecostal experience of the gifts of the Spirit provides a further dimension in exploring the activity of the Spirit among people of other faiths. This gift of God given by God for the service of the Kingdom of God could provide a new departure in engaging with other religions.

#### 7.1.4 The Kingdom of God

All three theologians examined in Part Two shared a consensus of opinion that the Kingdom of God is not geographical or Church- centered, it is “God-centered.” In Chapter Three of this thesis, Samuel Rayan argued that the Kingdom of God should become a reality here in this world rather than mere profession of God as King. In this regard, the challenge for Pentecostals is to avoid social withdrawal.

The manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s power accompanied by different gifts of the Spirit such as special powers or gifts, healing, prophecy and other gifts of the Spirit provides a way for oppression and castism to be confronted. Being filled with the Holy Spirit makes people do extraordinary things otherwise impossible. Pentecostals believe that by living in the life of the Spirit they can receive deliverances from all types of oppressions. The healing of sicknesses and other manifestations of the Spirit demonstrate the power of God over sickness and evil forces. The Holy Spirit is therefore seen as encompassing all of life’s experiences and provides liberation and a new perspective on life.

However, many Pentecostals are reluctant to engage with persons of another faith in social programs. K.P. Yohannan, founder and director of *Gospel for Asia* writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.233.



Our battle is not against flesh and blood or symptoms of sin like poverty and sickness. It is against Lucifer and countless demons who struggle day and night to take human souls into a Christless eternity.<sup>10</sup>

Biblical passages such as II Corinthians 6:14-16 - “what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever?” are used by other Pentecostals to discourage people. The challenge for Pentecostals is to understand the implications of the defeat of the “principalities and powers” for social change.<sup>11</sup>

The manifestations of the Spirit enabled the early Church to continue the mission of Jesus. The same manifestation of the Spirit today empowers people to be in service of God in response to human need. In this interpretation, the people are the locus of God’s presence and Christian’s attitude towards the oppressed becomes an act of imitating and following the teachings of Jesus. This foundation would help bridge the personal ethic found in Pentecostal tradition to a wider social ethic that takes seriously the Christian responsibilities for the world.

#### 7.1.4 Theological value of non - Christian scriptures

The theological understanding of the use of non-Biblical scriptures in the life and community of the Indian Church is another important issue for the theologians we examined in Part Two of this thesis. While the Bible is seen as a collection of various texts and is part of the Christian tradition, theologians such as Samartha have attempted to widen the concept of inspiration to include non-Christian scriptures. Samartha considered the Gospel to be at the centre of God’s revelation and viewed non-Biblical texts as God’s continuing witness of God’s love and care. In this view, non-Christian scriptures complement the Christian scripture. According to Ariarajah the purpose of reading multiple religious texts is no longer to despise or contradict other people’s texts.

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<sup>10</sup> Yohannan, K.P., *Revolution in world missions*, (Gfa books: TX), 1986, p.105.

<sup>11</sup> Yung, H., *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, (Regnum: Oxford), 1997, p.232. See Hollenweger, W., “The Pentecostal elites and the Pentecostal poor, A missed dialogue,” *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, Poewe, K., (ed), (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, SC), 1994.

Rather, it is to read the scriptures that sustain our neighbor's faith in order to appreciate and identify the differences and commonalties for spiritual growth. Rayan on the other hand qualifies the theological stance of Ariarajah by arguing that the "value" of other sacred scriptures is valid to the degree that these scriptures provide a source of inspiration in fighting oppression and degradation.

In recent times, Father Jacques Dupuis argues for an effective presence of the Holy Spirit in all human communities at all time and in their religious traditions. The Holy Spirit, according to Dupuis, is a "point of entry" into the life of human beings. In other words, the Holy Spirit is God's "point of entry," wherever and whenever God reveals and communicates Himself to people.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, every personal encounter with God occurs in the Holy Spirit. This can be seen not only operating in the personal encounter of God with the human beings but also in other religious traditions. Dupuis writes:

In the various stages of the history of salvation, just as in the personal story of human beings' salvation, the same Spirit is at work, revealing and manifesting God. Such meditation of the Holy Spirit in God's self-disclosure is also operative in the sacred scriptures of the religious traditions.<sup>13</sup>

However, Dupuis is not suggesting that the whole content of the non-Christian sacred scriptures is the word of God. He admits that "in the compilation of the Sacred books of other traditions, many elements may have been introduced that represent only human words concerning God."<sup>14</sup> Dupuis wants to develop a balance between what he sees as "human words concerning God" on the one hand, and the religious experiences of the sages and *rishis*, which he believes are directed by the Spirit, on the other. This being the case, Dupuis believes that

The personal experience of the Spirit by the *rishis*, inasmuch as, by divine providence, it is a personal overture on the part of God to the

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<sup>12</sup> Dupuis, J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1997, p.197.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.244.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.247.

nations, and inasmuch as it has been authentically recorded in their sacred scriptures, is a personal word addressed by God to them....<sup>15</sup>

The theological agenda behind recognizing “value” in non - Christian scriptures is the understanding that God is present in the South Asian culture and history. Therefore, through other scriptures we can come to a wider understanding of God. The sacred texts are normative to other faith communities just as the Bible is normative for Christians. All scriptures are trying to understand the mercy of God, the mystery of life and to give meaning to life and answer the question of mortality and all are to be equally recognized.

The popular view among Pentecostals as examined in the previous chapter is that non-biblical scriptures are not revealed, originated or inspired in any sense from God. Consequently, these theologians highlight the negative ethical aspects of a particular religion. They anchor their arguments on II Corinthians 11:14 “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” This judgment is based on an *a priori* decision that views any religion other than Christianity as not from God. In light of phenomenology of religion this argument cannot be scientifically sustained. Living in an Indian culture where there are many religious communities, Pentecostal Christians have a duty to explore the religious life and sources of Hindu and other religious traditions to search for manifestations of the Spirit. This approach goes beyond Padinjarekara and provides new opportunities for Pentecostals to recognize the wider activity of the Holy Spirit.

### 7.1.5 Indian Christian theology and hegemony

Another issue Pentecostals need to be aware of in developing an Indian Christian theology of religious pluralism is the concept of hegemony - theological and ideological domination. Imprisoned from 1926 until his death in 1937, Antonio Gramsci, Italian militant and scholar, speaks of hegemony in his prison notebooks as “a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

manifestations of individual and collective life.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, hegemony is a social and cultural reality that is interconnected with the existence of ideologies- in this context religious ideology.

Sathianathan Clarke, from the United Theological College and a Presbyterian in the Madras Diocese of the Church of South India, points out that an exclusive text-oriented discipline does not reflect the issues which the majority of Indian Christians face:

Theologising in the Indian context was thought to be an interpretation of Christian faith and doctrine within the framework of Indian scriptural themes, images, symbols and myths. So theology was concerned with Indian religious texts rather than the experience of local Christian people who were Dalits. Rarely do these religious texts reflect the Indian Christian religious world-view and so theology can become so alien as even to become anti-people.<sup>17</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, the critical implication of hegemony is that Indian Christians of higher caste origin developed a theological paradigm based on Hindu traditions without taking into consideration the world-view of the majority of Indian Christians. As a result, the high-caste expression of Christian faith does not reflect the issues that the majority of Indian Christians face. The common conception is that Indian Christian theology is anchored in Hindu religious and philosophical systems. James Massey, a Dalit theologian writes:

The roots of Indian Christian theology lie in the experiences of mostly upper castes/ class Christian converts of this century and the last century.... Now if these names are deleted from Indian Christian theology, there will be nothing left behind.<sup>18</sup>

In this process, the power of identity is an important concept. Manuel Castells in his book *The Power of Identity* argues that identity is the people's source of meaning and

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<sup>16</sup> Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers), 1971 p.328.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, S., “Redoing Indian Theology,” in *Bangalore Theological Forum* 18/2-3 April-Sept. 1986, p.129.

<sup>18</sup> Massey, J., “Resources for Dalit Theology,” in *Reader in Indian Christian Theology* (SPCK: Bangalore) p. 25.

experience. From a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. "The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what." He further writes:

In general terms, who constructs collective identity, and for what, largely determines the symbolic content of this identity, and its meaning for those identifying with it or placing outside of it.<sup>19</sup>

In developing an Indian Christian identity, upper caste Indian Christians looked to their Brahmanic religious heritage.

In the contemporary context, there is a ferocious argument among Indian theologians whether this approach is adequate. K.P. Aleaz, who interprets Jesus Christ in terms of *Advaita Vedanta*,<sup>20</sup> suggests that the Dalit theology need not be confrontational or anti-Brahmanic. Perhaps reading from his Syrian Orthodox background, Aleaz sees a convergence of the Brahmanic tradition and Dalit theology. This convergence occurs in the dialogical context of *Advaita Vedanta* in the theology and life of Indian theologians such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Aleaz feels that *Advaita Vedanta* theology is not anti-Dalit theology and that *Advaita* theology is capable of serving a deeper foundation for Dalit theology.<sup>21</sup> This can be clearly seen in Vivekananda's theology, which, he asserts, "[has] absolutely no privileges for anyone. The same power is in every man...the same potentiality in everyone...The idea that one man is born superior to another has no meaning in Vedanta."<sup>22</sup> For Aleaz the revolt should not be against the Upanishad or other Vedic scriptures, which despite appearances are on the side of the Dalits, but against those "upper castes that are ignorant of the teachings of equality of the Upanishad and its systematization in *Advaita Vedanta*".<sup>23</sup> In this convergence between the Brahmanic tradition and Dalit theology, Aleaz explores the possible accommodation of Dalit theology to Brahmanic ideas as a form of unity within diversity.

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<sup>19</sup> Castells, M., *The Power of Identity*, (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford) 1997, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> Aleaz, K.P., *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Aleaz, K.P., "The convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies: An Exploration" in *Indian Journal of Theology*, 36/1 1994, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., P. 104.

Many Dalit writers on the other hand, want to cut the umbilical cord with Hinduism. Dalit theologians argue that traditional Indian Christian theology was not representative of the Indian Church as it actually exists, with people from all different social and economic backgrounds. The churches with upper caste leadership and upper caste theology ignored the social base of the Indian church. Weary of being sidelined, many Dalit activists no longer recognize Hindu scriptures as offering an alternative to their life struggle. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel notes that, in recent times, Dalit writers have looked to the local religious narratives “of their own primeval myths, symbols, gods and heroes to rebuild their distorted religio-cultural identity” instead of Hindu scriptures or structures. He provides the example of the *pulayas*, a Dalit community in North Malabar, (Kerala), who relate to *Pottan Teyyam*, a figure totally outside the Brahmanic text.<sup>24</sup>

The search for liberation has led other Dalits to find different anti-brahmanical historical protest movements within the Hindu religion and elsewhere. When Dalit converts became Christians they looked at the Bible, heard the preacher and expected a radical restructuring of society. However, they quickly realized that the Christian converts from upper castes were using Hindu systems to further their own power interests just as before. In other words Brahmanic traditions are being used by upper caste Christians to maintain their power. For Dalits the whole Hindu structure has been a tool for oppression and they became Christians to find freedom.

The Dalit experience is one of suffering and humiliation. They are discriminated against socially, politically, economically and ideologically on the basis of their birth. One of the most discernible characteristics of Dalit theology is its insistence that God must be related to all aspects of Indian reality, including their struggles and sufferings. Dalits are God’s creation and have the freedom to encounter this divine reality just as much as any member of the upper caste society. A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel records a number of popular Dalit poems, used by Dalit Christians, which oppose the structure of Hinduism:

I ask for  
My rights as a man

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<sup>24</sup> Ayrookuzhiel, A., “The Dalits, Religions and Interfaith Dialogue,” *Hindu Christian Studies Bulletin* vol.7, 1994.

Each breath from my lungs  
Sets off a violent trembling  
In your texts and traditions  
Your hells and heavens  
Fearing pollution  
I will uproot the scripture like railway  
Tracks  
Burn like a city bus your lawless laws.<sup>25</sup>

Dalit theologians are referring back to a generic “past” or “local roots” for their own contextual theology grounded in their own identity. To answer what is Dalit theology, Massey asserts: “in simple terms, it is the local expression of the experience of local people of their faith.”<sup>26</sup> He goes on to say:

Dalit theology therefore has to offer voice to the experience of their dalitness. Their experience must be reflected and addressed in a clear and definitive way. The realities of the Dalit encountering are how to acquire daily provision, overcome oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy, and the denial of identity.<sup>27</sup>

Expressions of power in developing an Indian Christian theology can be witnessed through the dominance of high castes or Syrian Christians both in Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Clarke writes, “distinctively Indian Christians theology has been the work of the educated, privileged and elite.”<sup>28</sup> This he comments unconsciously represent the Indian social reality because Dalits were deprived of any form of education until very late and sometimes even punished for attending education institutions. Thus, Clarke argues that theological development effectively became an extension of Hindu or Orthodox culture. “It was least affected by the Dalit Christian people’s experience and world view, since it was not consciously a people’s theology.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> As quoted in Daniel, A., “Dalit theology: Punjab perspective” in *Religion and Society*, Vol.38 June 1991, p.58.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Clarke, S., op. cit., 1986, p.130.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



Power is also exercised through the means of sanskritization. Clarke writes that just as a non-Aryan would have to go through certain rites in order to be absorbed into the caste system, "Indian Christian theology is conceptually giving itself up to the very same rite: using the golden womb of classical Hinduism to disguise its Dalit identity."<sup>30</sup> The principle reason behind the use of Sanskrit in Indian Christian theology, according to Clarke, is to elevate social status:

In order to transform the Dalit identity, theology attempts to develop on the lines of Brahmanical philosophical thought patterns, cultic forms and symbols." Such theological construction, according to him, "is a kind of cultural ideological mask that continuously seeks opportunities to gain the cherished social status."<sup>31</sup>

Reflecting on his pastoral work, Saral K. Chatterji, former director of the Christian Institute of Study of Religion and Society, comments that the upper castes disapproved of his pastoral work among 'pariahs.' In certain congregations, even separate cemeteries were designated for high caste Christians and Dalit Christians by the same Church.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, according to Chatterji, Christians from upper castes:

Entrench themselves in positions of power and prestige and often practice and perpetuate socio-economic discrimination against the poorer and lower caste Christians, denying them opportunities for employment or promotion or participation in decision-making structures and processes.<sup>33</sup>

The theologians who are opposing the traditional Indian Christian approach are well aware of the contributions of these elite Indian theologians to overall Indian Christian theology. Nonetheless, Dalit theologians no longer can accept a theological framework which they feel was at the bedrock of the present oppression of the poor and untouchables.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Chatterji, S.K., "A.P. Nirmal- A Tribute," in *Religion and Society*, 129/1&2 March & June 1997 p.37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Gnanavaram, K., "Dalit Theology and the Parable of the Good Samaritan", *Journal for the study of the New Testament*, 50 June 1993, p. 68.

It is for these reasons Dalit theologians are reluctant to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths and fear that in engagement with Hindu philosophy and “higher” Hinduism, the worldview and social reality of the lower castes, would be neglected. The thesis will return to a Dalit Christian approach to religious pluralism in Chapter Seven.

This review of the contemporary South Asian Christian theological engagement with religious pluralism shows that despite different approaches their theology centers around a few inter-related themes: the presence and activity of God in the world; that the economy of God’s salvation is inherent in all religious traditions; that God’s Spirit is active beyond the Church; that the kingdom of God is to be realized in this world; and that the contextualization of the Christian faith in the Indian soil is not in accepting the hegemonic theology of the West or the “elite” theology of the natives, but in identification with the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in all religions transforming them into the reality of the reign of God.

## 7.2 Theological marks of Pentecostalism

Andre Droogers, who founded the Centre for the Study of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movements at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, identifies three common Pentecostal features. Firstly, the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit as experienced through the manifestations of the Spirit is central to Pentecostalism.<sup>35</sup> The Old Testament refers to the term *ruach* which is often translated as “wind” or “breath.” The Greek New Testament refers to the term *pneuma*, which points to the dynamic principle of life. While Pentecostals embrace this understanding of the Holy Spirit, they expand understanding of the Holy Spirit in an experiential way.

The baptism of the Spirit is recognized among Pentecostals as distinct from the conversion experience. Pentecostals argue that the disciples on the day of Pentecost had

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<sup>35</sup> Droogers, A., “Globalisation and Pentecostal Success,” *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, (Indiana University Press: Indianapolis), 2001, p.45.

already confessed Jesus as Christ (Matt. 16:16), and that Pentecost was their Baptism in the Spirit. The following table summarizes where Pentecostals identify Baptism of the Spirit in the New Testament.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Petts, D., "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Theological Distinctive," *Pentecostal Perspectives*, Warrington, K., (ed.), (Paternoster Press: London), 1998, p.99.

<b>Terminology Used</b>	<b>The Disciples At Pentecost</b>	<b>The Samaritans</b>	<b>Cornelius etc. In Caesarea</b>	<b>The Ephesians</b>
<b>The Spirit coming or upon</b>	<b>Acts 2:16-17</b> This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, "in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. <b>Cf Acts 11:15</b> The Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.	<b>Acts 8:16</b> The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them.	<b>Acts 10:44-45</b> The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message... poured out on the Gentiles. <b>Cf Acts 11:15</b> The Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.	<b>Acts 19:6</b> The Holy Spirit Came on them.
<b>Receiving (the gift of) the Holy Spirit</b>	<b>Acts 1:4</b> Wait for the gift my father promised. <b>Acts 2:38</b> You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <b>Acts 11:17</b> God gave them the same gift as he gave us.	<b>Acts 8:15</b> They prayed for them that they might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <b>Acts 8:17</b> Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. <b>Acts 8:18</b> The Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands.	<b>Acts 10:45</b> The gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles. <b>Acts 11:17</b> God gave them the same gift as he gave us.	<b>Acts 19:2</b> Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?
<b>Being baptized</b>	<b>Acts 1:5</b>		<b>Acts 11: 15-16</b>	

<b>in (or with) the Holy Spirit</b>	<p>You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.</p> <p><b>Acts 11:15-16</b></p> <p>As I began to speak the Holy Spirit came on them as he had on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord said, ‘...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.</p>		<p>As I began to speak the Holy Spirit came on them as he had on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord said, ‘...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.</p>	
<b>First manifestation recorded after receiving baptism in the Spirit</b>	<p><b>Speaking in tongues-</b></p> <p>120 (?)</p> <p>People involved <b>Acts 2:1-4</b></p>	<p>Incomplete description- manifestation not recorded.</p>	<p><b>Speaking in tongues-</b> a household involved.</p> <p><b>Acts 10:44-46</b></p>	<p><b>Speaking in tongues</b></p> <p>About 12 people involved.</p> <p><b>Acts 19:1-7</b></p>

Second characteristic of the Pentecostalism is the conversion experience.<sup>37</sup> Pentecostals talk about conversion as “a dramatic personal event” which is linked to the experience of the Spirit. The consequences of this are felt in the everyday life of the believer. A distinction is drawn in a personal life history between pre - and post - conversion phases. “The watershed is a ... spiritual experience that fundamentally changes the parameters of his or her life.” As such receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit becomes an important resource in the ongoing struggle for life. After the conversion, customs and culture are often re-interpreted in light of the new experience.<sup>38</sup>

Droogers’ third characteristic of the Pentecostalism is the duality of the Pentecostal world-view represents another characteristic of Pentecostalism.<sup>39</sup> Pentecostals believe that this world is divided into two spheres: that of God and his believers, and that of the devil and his followers, and that a war rages between these two in this world. In their understanding, a Pentecostal convert moves from the world of devil and his followers to that of God and his believers. Among Pentecostals there is the absolute certainty that God will ultimately win.<sup>40</sup>

### 7.3 What an Indian Pentecostal approach to religious pluralism could look like?

In the enterprise of contextualizing Christianity in India, missionaries and Indian Christians have often looked at the “great” philosophical and religious traditions of India with little attention being paid to the popular religions of India. As a matter of fact, Jyoti Sahi, an Indian Christian artist and thinker, argues that Christianity was not related to the “popular” religions because these traditions “have been looked upon as superstitious or pagan.”<sup>41</sup> He points out that the majority of converts to Christianity are from villages and tribal backgrounds. Less than ten percent of Christians in India come from the

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<sup>37</sup> Droogers, A., op.cit. p.45.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Sahi, J., “Popular Spirituality in India,” *SEDOS*, May, 1989, p.146.

“high caste.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, ironically, he writes, “inculturation and dialogue has been directed towards this group and so little has been done with regard to folk religion and popular spirituality.”<sup>43</sup> In this connection, the Federation of Asian Bishops recommended that there is a “need of entering into dialogue with hundreds of millions who live their relationship with God in a way which has been described as popular religion.”<sup>44</sup>

Jyoti Sahi, defines popular religions as those that are “based on symbols, images and myths, folk stories and parables.”<sup>45</sup> Aloysius Pieris utilizes the categories of cosmic and meta- cosmic religions to understand popular religiosity. According to Pieris, it is the cosmic religions that form the basis of popular religion that relies on experience and faith symbols. It provides meaning to life and as such “it represents the basic psychological posture that the homo religious (residing in each of us) adopts subconsciously toward the mysteries of life.”<sup>46</sup> The meta-cosmic religions on the other hand represent faith systems that elevate their spiritual reflection to a philosophical and abstract level. However, these two categories include elements of both traditions. Religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity contain within themselves cosmic and meta-cosmic dimensions, which exist together.<sup>47</sup>

### 7.3.1 Dalit and Pentecostal Identity

Amaladoss suggests that in the discourse between Gospel and culture special attention must be given to popular religion because it is “usually neglected.”<sup>48</sup> Amaladoss argues that even the Second Vatican Council that urged the people to recognize true and holy

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Rosales, G. B. & Arevalo, C. G. (eds.) *For all the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, (Orbis Books: New York), 1992, pp.249-250.

<sup>45</sup> Sahi, J., op. cit., p.147.

<sup>46</sup> Pieris, A., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (Orbis: New York), 1988, pp.71-74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Amaladoss, M, *Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many be One?*, (ISPCK: Delhi), 1998, p.113.



elements in other religions tended to limit this recognition to the “great” religions.<sup>49</sup> He credits this neglect to the “elite” theological engagement with “high” culture and a rationalist secular worldview. “The ‘elite’ tend to disparage popular religion as syncretistic and imagine that religious reform / renewal consists in eliminating popular elements from religious practice.”<sup>50</sup> The hegemonic tradition label popular religion often as “illegitimate” or the religion of the “uneducated,” “primitive” and “superstitious.”

### 7.3.2 The Holy Spirit and Shakti

In the Indian context, the Christian message is interpreted through not only Brahmanical traditions but also through popular religious views. The term *Shakti* which is translated as “power,” “energy,” or “force” is an important concept among Dalit Hindus in describing their belief in gods. In Chapter Four, we saw Rayan utilizing this concept in his support of Dalit spirituality, to describe the Holy Spirit’s freedom and power. For Rayan *Shakti* referred to the divine energy or manifestation of the feminine in God, i.e. *Vishnumaya* is said to be the *Shakti* of *Vishnu*, *Durga* of *Siva*. In this connection the Catholic theologian Vandana also utilizes this feminine aspect of the *Shakti* in her theology. She writes:

Over the years I have grown to see and believe that the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity whom we call the Holy Spirit (Spiritus Breath of God) or the Atman of the Upanishads is the ‘Motherhood’ in God; the Mother who gives life – prana or the vital energy by which we are able to live, think, talk, love, etc., all by the same one energy.<sup>51</sup>

While this emphasis is based upon the Hindu sacred scriptures, the term *Shakti* is more nuanced than Rayan and Vandana described it to be. In popular religions *Shakti* is applied to both male and female gods.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.114.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.113.

<sup>51</sup> Vandana, “God as Mother in the Hindu and Christian Traditions,” *Shabda Shakti Sangam*, (NBCLC: Bangalore), 1995, p.51.

<sup>52</sup> Ayrookuzhiel, A., *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism*, (CLS: Madras), 1983, p.154.

Abraham Ayrookuzhiel's research into the religious traditions of the Hindus in Chirakkal, Kerala reveals that while the term *Shakti* is often used to describe their religious reality it has a variety of interpretations. Some respondents he interviewed used *Shakti* as synonymous with Brahman, *Isvaran* and *Daivam* which are common names of the divine reality. All gods and goddess regardless of stature were also said to be *Shakti-s* or to have *Shakti*. Sometimes gods lost their *Shakti* because their places were not kept ritually pure or necessary rituals were not performed. Ayrookuzhiel concludes that *Shakti* provides the framework of their "conception of the sacred reality."<sup>53</sup>

In the popular religiosity of the Dalit people, *Shakti* or *Shaktikal* (plural of *Shakti*) are never far off and are always near and ready to help devotees and punish transgressors because human beings are impinged upon by various hostile and potentially hostile forces. These forces are viewed as having power to intervene in people's lives and cause affliction and illness.

The Pentecostal understanding of the Spirit is comparable to the *Shakti* in terms of Spirit's Pentecostal power. The Pentecostal vision of *Shakti* is influenced by the account in the Book of Acts Chapter Two, where the Spirit appears in the form of wind and flame regenerating and renewing the disciples to carry on the work of the kingdom of God. From a Pentecostal perspective, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that overcomes the afflictions brought by satanic influences. Pentecostalism not only acknowledges their existence but continuously demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit to defeat them. Consequently, Pentecostals were able to experience the immediate presence of God in everyday life. Therefore, it is no surprise that Pentecostals emphasize that through the Holy Spirit God is actively involved in the events of human history. Thus, Caplan writes:

Unlike the liberal Christianity imported by late nineteenth and early twentieth missionaries of the principal denominations, and inherited by

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp.154-155.

their successors in the hierarchy of the Indian Church, which denied the 'reality' of evil forces in the everyday lives of the followers and potential converts, Pentecostalism not only acknowledges their existence but continuously demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit to vanquish them.<sup>54</sup>

This Pentecostal interpretation of the Holy Spirit in terms of *Shakti* provides a contextual understanding of the activity of the Spirit being that the power of the Spirit bringing life and liberation to the immediate situation of the people.

### 7.3.3 Freedom for personal expression

The personal relationship with God and the freedom to express one's emotions and experiences is another important characteristic of Dalit religious traditions. The *Caitanya* movement of the *Bhakti* tradition<sup>55</sup> emphasizes not only a personal relationship with a particular God but also encourages devotees to be involved in corporate singing with drums and cymbals which often lead the worshippers towards ecstatic experiences. The *Caitanya* tradition exhibited many forms of ecstasy including laughter, crying, rolling on the ground, shaking and trembling, sweating, roaring and acting as if possessed which for the believer is the power of the *Shakti*. The god / goddess makes special visitation and manifests divine power through individuals. Such a divinely possessed person is said to be the agent of that particular deity. The manifestation of the power can be given to any person, so gender or social status of the person is irrelevant. This characteristic of the encounter with the divine can also be witnessed in the Pentecostal movement.<sup>56</sup>

Speaking in tongues, healing and visions are part of the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements in India. The Pentecostal movement has from its beginning emphasized the belief and practice of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. When

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<sup>54</sup> Caplan, L., op.cit, 1983, p.42.

<sup>55</sup> Caitanya movement began in the sixteenth century Bengal with saint Sri. Caitanya Mahaprabhu. See *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.3, p.3.

<sup>56</sup> Sam, T.S., *A Theological Approach to the Ecstatic nature of God-experience in the Caitanya tradition of Hinduism and the Pentecostal tradition of Christianity*, (B.D. Thesis, U.T.C. Bangalore) 1999.

Pentecostals speak about the manifestation of Spirit, they generally mean an experience of the Holy Spirit's power accompanied by different gifts of the Spirit.

Pentecostals in India believe that after conversion and baptism in water, a further and different religious experience is necessary for all believers. This is known as "baptism of the Spirit". It is normally characterized though not always by the initial physical sign of speaking in tongues. Pentecostals base this experience on the Biblical pattern found in Acts 2, Acts 8, and Acts 19. In all these instances, a further religious experience was necessary in order to bring the disciples in Jerusalem, Samaria and Ephesus to the standard of "mature" Christians. This life in the Spirit provides an experiential reality of the presence of God. Subsequently, there is a sense of the immediate presence of God. This manifestation of the Spirit is seen as a gift from God. These manifestations of the Spirit as stated in I Corinthians 12 are given when and to whom the Spirit wills.

The Pentecostals believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit - speaking in tongues, prophesying, healing, dreams and visions among others - were not meant for the early Christians alone. This experience in the divine outpouring of the Spirit points to the various ways in which the Spirit of God is being manifested in the life of the believers individually and corporately. Pentecostals associate these manifestations of the Spirit with the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In this there is the sense that the divine is not transcendent but active in the everyday life of devotees. In the Pentecostal community God is seen as actively participating in the life of His children. In this sense, the troubles and trials of the sick and the needy are at the heart of God's concern.<sup>57</sup>

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that Pentecostalism is close to the indigenous insight of *Shakti* and the God-experience through freedom of personal spiritual expressions and spontaneity in worship.

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<sup>57</sup> See Joshua, M.S., *Spadika Samudram, (Ocean of Blessings)*, (International Gospel Church: Kottayam), 2001; Fee, G.F., "Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The issue of Separability and Subsequence," *Pneuma*, 7/2, 1985, pp.87-99.

### 7.3.4 Indian Christians and the Spirit world

Another shared characteristic Christian Pentecostals and non-Christians is a similar world-view i.e. of spirits and evil and misfortunes.<sup>58</sup> Rowena Robinson, associate professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai, also points out that “the human world is seen as being impinged upon by various capricious, hostile and potentially hostile forces which must either be avoided or placated to prevent them from doing harm.”<sup>59</sup> These forces are viewed as having power to intervene in people’s lives and cause affliction and illness. The evil spirits are usually concentrated on areas and places associated with death or accidents: “Cremation grounds and cemeteries, trees, wells and boundary walls or the margins of fields or villages” are said to be congregating places of *bhut* or *pey* (evil spirits).<sup>60</sup> The sources of affliction are said to be spirits such as ancestral spirits because they are displeased with their descendants or restless because they had died violent or ‘bad’ premature deaths.<sup>61</sup>

When it is realised that misfortune has occurred due to sorcery or evil spirits, Hindus participate in certain rituals through which devotees appeal to various deities in the divine hierarchy of Hinduism. Among the deities, which south Indian Hindus appeal to is *Ganesh*, the elephant - headed deity or *Murukan*. While these deities are considered to be a less god by people of higher castes, among the Hindu masses, *Ganesh* and *Murukan* are regarded as an intermediary to higher gods. They are also seen as protecting from the threats of malign agents.

Through various rituals the specialist will appease the goddess. The highlight occurs when the specialist enters a state of trance and becomes possessed by the deity. When the divine goddess enters the person and speaks through him or her “to those present,

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<sup>58</sup> Caplan, L., *Class and Culture in urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford) 1987, p.205.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, R, *Christians of India*, (Sage Publications: London) 2003, p.173.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

giving advice, reassurance, promises, and ritual prescriptions for dealing with all manner of misfortune. When necessary, evil spirits are exorcised.”<sup>62</sup> In this divine order, higher gods control lower beings. “The *pey* (evil spirits) can be dealt with through recourse to the deities whose powers are greater, and generally more beneficent.”<sup>63</sup> However, these higher divinities operate only on behalf of their Hindu devotees.

Non- Pentecostal Christians turned to their religious leaders for help only to find that they were unable to provide an appropriate response to their understanding about affliction. The majority of Christians in South India attribute many misfortunes to sorcery which is caused by *Mantravadam*.<sup>64</sup> The human agents responsible for sorcery are *Mandarvatri* who through various mediums have access to secret knowledge and mystical power that they can employ on behalf of paying clients. The persons who engage their services usually bear personal grudges against the intended victim(s). The sorceresses generally acknowledge and encourage belief in their power, but publicly insist that their sole aim is to protect their clients from others who would injure them. They deny using their magic to cause harm, all the while hinting that they could if they wished. The evil spirits are sometimes regarded as ghosts of those bad characters, but more usually it is suggested that they are the ghosts of persons who died untimely or inauspicious deaths.<sup>65</sup>

In recent times, Paul Hiebert writing on his experience from India argues that the Indian and Biblical worldviews consist of beliefs in local deities, ancestral and other spirits, demons, and the like of whom or which act in this world.<sup>66</sup> In support of the reality of spiritual powers, Pentecostals turn to the Bible. Pentecostals also point out that Jesus Christ recognized and engaged with the spirit world. The acts of healing and deliverance were an integral part of Jesus’ ministry. Biblical passages such as Mark 1:27 show “unclean spirits” obeying the commands of Jesus and recognizing the superior power of

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<sup>62</sup> Caplan, L., op. cit., 1987, p.205.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Caplan, L., op. cit., pp.28-45,

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Hiebert, P. G., “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology*, Vol.10 /1, 1982, p.35-47.



the Spirit in Jesus. Paul's writings also show considerable account of the spirit world. Thus, the evidence found in the Bible is not only justifiable for contextualization in the Indian context, but it also validates exploration of and identification with spiritual forces outside Israel. This does not mean that these expressions are survivals of the previous religious traditions. To the contrary in the engagement with cultural and religious traditions, certain interpretations started to emerge that provide new meanings.

The tension in the discussion of the Spirit and "spirits" can be witnessed among Indian Christians. On one hand Rayan with the liberation theological paradigm recognizes the "powers" and "spirits" in terms of social structures against which liberation is to be waged and on the other, the belief among Pentecostal understanding of "powers" and "spirits" in terms of supernatural. M.M. Thomas takes account of the unfolding of a satanic spirit at work in creation and history and suggests the need to be "involved in a spiritual warfare." However, Thomas defines "warfare" as "between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of human self-righteousness, of principalities and powers, and of the forces of death."<sup>67</sup> Walter Wink, professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary applies the Biblical language of spirits, demons and angels to social and political powers and systems. In his book, *Engaging the Powers*, Wink attempts to "name" the "principalities and powers" that subvert human life.<sup>68</sup> However, Clinton Arnold argues that Wink's approach to "spirits" takes place only at a metaphorical level and "demythologises" the spirit world.<sup>69</sup>

As was evidenced in Chapter Six, the dominant Pentecostal view demonizes people of other faiths. This negative blanket statement does not help Pentecostals to engage with people of other faiths. However, Pentecostals are correct in acknowledging that spirits other than the Holy Spirit are active in the world. For Pentecostals the supernatural spirits found in the New Testament descriptions of Jesus' ministry of exorcism are not reflected in the mainline Churches. In contrast, Pentecostals are able to acknowledge the

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas, M.M., "The Holy Spirit and the Spirituality for Political Struggles," *Ecumenical Review*, 42/3-4 (July-Oct), 1990, p.218.

<sup>68</sup> Wink, W., *Engaging with Powers*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1992, p.3-10.

<sup>69</sup> Clinton A., *Powers of Darkness: A thoughtful Biblical Look at an Urgent Challenge Facing the Church*, (Leicester: IVP) 1992, p.198-205.



everyday existential problems of people rather than mere metaphysical theories about God and cosmos. Consequently, they are able to provide an understanding of the Holy Spirit that reveals the power of God in everyday life.

In contrast to missionaries and hegemony of the Indian Churches, Pentecostals accepted the reality of the spirit world on the one hand, and resisted a mere assimilation to the indigenous interpretation of spirits on the other. This critical reflection has led Pentecostals to contribute to the re-thinking of cosmology of spirits by re-expressing it in terms of identifying with the Holy Spirit who has power over all “powers and principalities,” affecting the Indian people.

### 7.3.5 Pentecostalism and Popular Religion as a force for liberation

Punishment for the wicked, a sense of the guidance and the presence of divine reality in one's life, signs and miracles believed to be from gods are all elements of popular religions. Retribution or restitution is central to the divine manifestation as well as a strong sense of God's justice here on earth. In this connection, popular religions do not offer abstract philosophical solutions to the problems that threaten everyday life.<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, they seek for immediate resolution for physical and social needs. God(s) in this approach is not transcendent but immanent, ready to help and ready to protect people from evil. In this tradition, it is the feeling of insecurity and experiences of prayers being answered by a particular god(s) that enables people to believe in god(s). Amaladoss points out that the immediate satisfaction for physical and social needs - realizing the close presence of God to protect and defend; democratization and participative ethos which are accessible to all - “can be explicated into consciousness, applied to the concrete social situation and be made to animate new liberative movements.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Amaladoss, M., op.cit., 1998, p.123.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

India's massive poverty where millions of people regardless of religious affiliation lack access to natural resources must become a challenge of Indian Pentecostal theology. Indian Pentecostals provide many facilities and make regular donations to social agencies but a shift is required in order to ask structural questions concerning why and how people are being oppressed. This participation in the struggle against poverty and injustice is rooted in the Bible. Matthew 25:31-46:

When I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me ...I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers, however humble, you did for me.

Indian Pentecostals need to recognize the reality that they by themselves cannot solve the problem of poverty. For many Pentecostals "the poor are always with you" (Mark 14: 7a) has become the biblical backbone to legitimize their not being actively engaged with the struggle against poverty. But as Chad Myers points out this passage is talking about the "social location of the Church" rather than the "social necessity of poverty."<sup>72</sup> In this narrative, Jesus is among the marginalized at the house of a leper when he is ministered lavishly by a woman. Objection was given to this practice since oil could be "sold and may be given to the poor." This objection is appropriate given this is what Jesus said to the rich man. However, Myer argues the context is different. Jesus is in table fellowship with the outcast and the woman is participating in solidarity with them, since they are a community committed to sharing life with the poor.<sup>73</sup> The challenge for Pentecostals is to move beyond denominational boundaries and work in solidarity with the poor regardless of religious affiliation. In this Pentecostals can see "they who are not against us are for us." (Mark 9:40) This calls for a move from insulation from the poor to the challenge of facing the wider struggle for justice for all in a country of religious plurality.

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<sup>72</sup> Myers, C., *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?*, (Orbis: New York), 1994, p.293.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

From a Pentecostal perspective, the Holy Spirit is active in the present struggle of the oppressed by giving people strength to face up to the struggle for their own survival and the hegemony of a socio-economic system. Pentecostals believe that the emergence of the Pentecostal community is the result of the action of the Spirit. This Pentecostal community is more than an institution. It is the continuation of the movement started by Jesus who committed himself to the justice of the kingdom of God. The Church then becomes a sign and a vehicle for liberation. In this regard, the poor become God's poor. However, liberation of the poor and eradication of poverty must not be reduced to social and political structures. Rather, since evil spirits are at work in human history, the reality of spiritual oppression must be taken more seriously. Pentecostals have a way of dealing with this on the basis of the reality of the Holy Spirit. They know good as well as evil among spirits. It is in this realm of spiritual oppression that inflicts the life of many people that Pentecostals are able to engage through the gifts of the Spirit.

### 7.3.6 Popular religion and Inter – religious Dialogue

It is fair to conclude from Chapter Six that among Indian Pentecostals there is no dialogue with people of other faiths. However, Part Two of this thesis pointed out many other Indian Christians are committed to their Christian belief while co-operating with people of other faiths. It is the considered opinion of this author that in order for Pentecostalism to take root in India, it must move beyond a social accommodation of religious pluralism to a theological engagement with people of other faiths. This can be undertaken without radical departure from a Pentecostal view of the Bible.

In the beginning, when “the earth was without form and void,” the Spirit of God “was moving over the face of the waters.”(Genesis 1:2) The central affirmation it makes is that, creation itself, is the act by which God through the Spirit, as it is through Jesus Christ, calls into being all things. Thus, the Spirit of God has been everywhere present, sustaining and nourishing all things on earth. Although sin has corrupted the creation, the world and humankind continues to reflect the image of God. (Gen. 9:6)

The New Testament passage Luke 4:18-21, which declared by Jesus to be fulfilled in himself, in that the Spirit of God has anointed him to bring deliverance to the poor and the broken hearted, the captives and the prisoners warrant Pentecostals to take seriously social justice. The importance of the servant of Yahweh as having the spirit in terms of establishing justice on earth challenges Pentecostals to appropriate the power of the Spirit in the fight against injustice and oppression wherever they are found.

For Pentecostals passages such as Luke 9:1-2, where “Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure disease ... [and] to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” demonstrate the presence of Christ’s continuing power in the everyday life of the believer. In doing so, Pentecostals are able to reinterpret Christian faith as engaging with the contextualized realities of India. In this respect, the Pentecostal world view need not be a cultural accommodation with the indigenous world-view, but rather a re-interpretation of the Christian message in light of the contextual reality. This approach provides new meanings, not just parallel analysis of the indigenous spiritual life and the Pentecostal spiritual experiences.

While God is never fully known until the *eschaton*, God continues to reveal himself in history through the Holy Spirit. If this is the case, then the Holy Spirit is not limited to Christianity and the history of the religions needs to be taken seriously in order to discern and discover the power and actuation of the Holy Spirit. John 16:12-15 speaks of the depths of God that are yet to be discovered. Jesus says, “I have yet many things to say to you,” and through the work of the Holy Spirit, one will be “guided” to all truths. In this connection, it is conceivable for a Pentecostal theology to embrace the activity of God in the whole world not just within the Church. As Vinay Samuel, an Indian Christian theologian, writes, “Pentecostals must reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit in other religions and develop a theology of religions that better reflects their own understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>74</sup> The Holy Spirit is understood in the

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel, V., “Pentecostalism as a Global culture: A Response,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion made to Travel*, Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus & Douglas Petersen (eds.) (Regnum: Oxford), 1999, p.258.

book of Acts as the driving force of the God's mission. In other words, Holy Spirit is behind every witness of the Gospel.

For Pentecostals, the life in the Spirit provides an experiential reality of the presence of God. Subsequently, there is a sense of the immediate presence of God. These manifestations of the Spirit as stated in I Corinthians 12 are given when and to whom the Spirit wills. The gifts of the Holy Spirit - speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, dreams and visions among others - were not meant for the early Christians alone. This experience of the divine outpouring of the Spirit points to the various ways in which the Spirit of God is being manifested in the life of the believers individually and corporately. Pentecostals associate these manifestations of the Spirit with the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In this there is the sense that the divine is not transcendent but active in the everyday life of devotees.

The activity of the Holy Spirit in the faith communities of other religious traditions was highlighted at the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991. The Orthodox Church joined the Evangelicals in expressing "concern" over the discernment of the Spirit in human society as a result of sin and error. In this connection, a "high Christology" was recommended as the only authentic Christian base for dialogue with persons of other living faiths. The second criterion that was recommended is the biblical list of the fruits of the Spirit. In other words, the criterion was not belief in the Lordship of Christ but Christ-likeness. While this provides a positive approach to other religions, Pentecostals want to integrate the marks of the Spirit in ethical terms with spontaneous and gracious appearances of the Spirit. Pentecostals acknowledge that the ethical criterion alone cannot be definitive in discerning the Spirit among spirits. For Pentecostals, the manifestations of the Spirit cultivate and nurture a sense of the immediate presence of God. The experience of the manifestations of the Spirit is seen as the beginning of life in the Spirit that starts to have the fruits of the Spirit. In other words, the gifts of the Spirit must manifest in personal lives before it is displayed as fruits of the Spirit in the socio-ethical terms. The manifestations of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:1-14; 14: 1-40; Rom. 12: 6-8) then become the criterion of discernment that enable Christians to recognize the Holy Spirit's activity and presence in other

religions. Therefore, Pentecostals need to explore the religious life and sources of other religious traditions to search for manifestations of the Spirit. Where such specificity of the presence of God is available, Indian Pentecostals should be open to the possibility that God's Spirit is present. Therefore, it is the life in the Spirit that needs to be explored.

The manifestations of the Spirit in popular religions are authenticated to the degree that these religions operate as life affirming. This liberates people from all types of bondages including the tyranny of cosmic powers and unjust socio – political structures. The goal is not to re-interpret other religions in light of the Christian faith, but to witness that God has delivered all people from bondage and calls people to be stewards of the world. Human beings are active agents in the fight against oppression and injustice which disrupt God's purposes in this world. Since God's justice is contextual, Pentecostals need to participate with people of all faith in building a community. Thus faith in Christ necessitates Pentecostals to engage in religious dialogue, social action, political conflict and economic development. This attitude toward other religions represents openness to the people of other faiths and unwillingness to pre-judge them in a way that distorts the truth of other religions. The goal in this attitude is to create "an openness and friendship" between people of different faith communities. This process would help one eliminate stereotypes and a negative attitude towards members of other faiths and build a tolerant community.

Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism will be a theology that is based on a Pneumatology, the economy of the Spirit, that embraces Christology rather than a Christology of Indian Pentecostals like Ambumkayathu and Padinjarekara which ignores the work of the Spirit. To this degree the thesis has shown that this Pentecostal emphasis is in agreement with the accentuation that has emerged from the three main theologians examined in Part Two of this thesis. And, this provides a promising positive area into Christian dialogue in India to which, the researcher would argue Indian Pentecostals can bring a particular contribution and perspective.



It's evidence situated in the distinction that Pentecostals draw between fruits of the Spirit in ethical terms and spiritual manifestations of life in the Spirit. Indian Christian theologians examined in Part Two of this thesis deals with the latter while ignoring the former. Pentecostals are able to draw not just on ethical principles but actual experiences of the Holy Spirit that empowers people with new spiritual skills of healing, visions and prophecy. In these Pentecostals are affirming Biblical testimony of the reality of the gifts of the Spirit in addition to the ethical values also affirmed in the theological work of three theologians in Part Two. This leads to, in the opinion of the researcher, Pentecostals of being potentially able to engage with the spiritual universe in which people of other religions live and not just address the same social environment in which they live.

The three theologians examined in Part Two are active in the sphere of social and political ethics that they found meeting ground for engaging with other religions, and that in so far it is substantially focused on struggling to overcome human oppression; it is the oppression of economic poverty and social injustice. This theology seemingly cannot address the realm of spiritual oppression that inflicts the life of many people. It is in this area, Pentecostals has the spiritual gifts to be able to engage.

As Pentecostals welcome mainline theological positions in that the economy of the Spirit as identified with the positive ethical values in the New Testament, Pentecostals know by experience of spiritual world, by taking seriously, the reality of good and evil spirits. The Spirit related to Jesus Christ is able to distinguish between the good from the evil in the spiritual world. Pentecostals take account of the "principalities and powers" found in religions, including Christianity that opposes the purposes of God. In this framework, the presence and power of demonic forces operating in history are not neglected. Pentecostalism not only acknowledges their existence but continuously demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit to defeat them, and where the spiritual energy produces healing in whatever name achieved, Pentecostals can say it is the work of the Spirit by that Spirit making Christ present in meeting the immediate need of the person.



Pentecostals need to explore the marks of the spiritual experience and to show in appropriate ways this can be understood in Christ himself healing the non-Christians and that this creates a community of the Spirit between the Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals and that as the New Testament witnesses the Spirit “will guide you in all the truth.” (John 16:13) Therefore, Pentecostals by definition must trust in the Spirit to give freedom in relation to this activity of the Spirit.

In place of an exclusive approach to the theology of religions and that of Karl Rahner’s “anonymous Christians,” the Pentecostal approach to the theology of religions could be based on a pneumatological inclusivism. Since the Holy Spirit is active outside as well as within the Church, the mission of the Church is to engage with spiritual gifts, i.e. manifestations of the Spirit, which are specific forms of universal grace found in other religions. The Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism provides the basis to engage with Indian realities by pneumatological inclusivism, in that the Spirit is articulated in Indian religions through the manifestations of particular spiritual gifts. This is actualized in terms of developing a “community of the Spirit” (II Cor. 13:13-14) that includes people who experience and express the Spirit in different ways. This shared experience of the Spirit can contribute towards an indigenous insight in terms of identifying with the “spirit world” of the Indian popular religiosity and providing the basis for Christian co-operation with people of other faiths.

The heart of Pentecostal experience is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is not just a universal Spirit but is identified with the immediate presence of God through the manifestations of the Spirit in the life of the believers. Such an approach to the “unbound Spirit” provides a window for Pentecostals to engage with religious pluralism. This opens up the possibility of affirming the work of the Holy Spirit among people of other faiths while providing a criterion for assessing manifestations of the Spirit. It also relates to discriminating between the Spirit and oppressive spirits and acknowledges the gifts of the Spirit wherever they may be found. The Spirit, who in the past empowered the disciples to witness of the kingdom of God, empowers us to discern the presence and action of the Spirit within the culture, history and religions of India.

If this thesis has succeeded in demonstrating the economy of the Holy Spirit then it raises the question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Pentecostals affirm Jesus Christ as the Son of God incarnated in the history of humankind. Having become a man, he lived a human life, “in every respect tempted as we are,” (Heb. 4:15) and died for the salvation of the world and was buried; raised from the dead, and was made Christ and Lord by God. (Acts 2:36) While this “constitutive” uniqueness of Jesus Christ is the point of departure for Pentecostals, they must also recognize the wider work of God i.e. through the Spirit.

Theologically, the Spirit is operative in Christ in its fullness and is at work in all creation, and present therefore as the source of all human religious experiences. The Holy Spirit continues the work of Christ in “convincing the world of sin” (John 16:8-9) and empowers people to overcome evil and injustice. In India, this opens up an avenue for Pentecostals to explore the activity of the Spirit both within Hindu religious experiences of the people, equally outside Dalit religions, including *Bhakti*, and *Jnana* traditions, each pursued equally in relating to the religious experiences of the people. It is perhaps here that the Pentecostals are potentially more able than mainline Indian Christian theologians to hold Hindu and Dalit identities together, resolving the anthesis that presently exists. By affirming the universal presence of the *logos*, an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit opens up the possibility for Pentecostals to explore more thoroughly their social community, i.e. Dalit religiosity, as Allan Anderson has done in the African context.

In demonstrating that Pentecostals emphasize the immediate presence of God a question for Pentecostal is opened: How do Pentecostals understand the authority of the Bible in light of this experience of God? Pentecostal holds firmly to the belief that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. At the same time Pentecostals already have a base in the Indian cultural background in which *rsis* experiential knowledge of *sruti*, consisting of what was seen or heard, has priority over *smriti*, the reasoned interpretation of the Vedas. By analogy that Pentecostals likewise give priority to experience, without which exegesis is impossible. In other words, a mere exegetical study of the text that is not

inspired by renewed life in the Spirit cannot discover God's truth. This experience is higher than doing theology. It is the nature of experiencing the Spirit as witnessed in the Bible that is central rather than a doctrine. This means that for Pentecostals the Bible is not just a sacred text by the witness of the Spirit. God's word is becoming actualized in present history as in the days of the Biblical events.

This being the case, the question is what is the relationship between the Bible and sacred scriptures of other religions? In the Indian Pentecostal hermeneutical process the Holy Spirit is an active agent in the interpretative process. For Indian Pentecostals, the truth of the Scripture comes through the activity of the Holy Spirit in relation to each person. Biblical criticism is a tool to perceive the meaning of a passage: "But the written word comes alive only when the Spirit illumines the mind and convicts the heart that God is speaking directly to one through the words of scripture."<sup>75</sup> A post-modern hermeneutical paradigm, particularly a reader-response approach provides a creative method of reading which is open to a wider interpretation.

The reader-response theory argues that "the reader is to supply the gaps which are in the text, to iron out the repetitions and the doublets and the inconsistencies, whether by way of harmonizing them, or by way of offering an alternative explanation."<sup>76</sup> In other words, the reader-response does not put emphasis on the composition or the development of the text, but "seek[s] to ascertain what the final concerns of the text might be."<sup>77</sup> The emphasis here is on the active role of the reader and how the text affects life today. Therefore, what matters in the reader-response approach is the transformative effect of a text rather than the original meaning. This post-modern interpretation of the role of the reader provides a medium for the Holy Spirit to illuminate the meaning of the scripture. In reading the sacred narratives this way, the reader will enter into a hermeneutical conversation with the text, and invites the Spirit of God to meet his/her needs.

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<sup>75</sup> Coward, H., "The Experience of Scripture in Hinduism and Christianity," in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, (New York: Orbis Books), 1989, p.244.

<sup>76</sup> Gillingham, S.E., *One Bible Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies*, (London: SPCK) 1998, p.183.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p.184.

In other words, it is not just what the reader brings to the text or what the text brings to the reader, but the transforming action that takes place when the reader engages with the text. In the Indian Pentecostal hermeneutical dialogue the Holy Spirit breaks into history and becomes an active agent in the interpretative process. In this approach, the Holy Spirit encounters the reader in the act of reading his/her sacred scriptures. This approach takes seriously the voices of Indian Christians from lower caste origins whose experience of other religious systems and sacred narratives did not provide them with self-dignity, as well as those who find the Hindu faith system (and other religious systems) as the basis of their religious quest. Since God has never left Himself without his self-disclosure to humanity (Acts 14:17) in the act of reading non-Biblical scriptures, the Holy Spirit illuminates the devotee to an experience of God.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion: Drawing the strands together

#### Introduction

The hypothesis of this research has been that Pentecostalism, even though in India has shown reluctance to engage with religious pluralism theologically, has significant contributions to this field of Christian concern. Pentecostals have traditionally situated themselves fairly uncritically in the exclusivist camp of the theology of religions emphasising the uniqueness of Christ. Over against this the author has proposed a Pneumatology, the economy of the Spirit, which responds to the particular insights that Pentecostals bring to the understanding of the Holy Spirit, and provides them with an opportunity to engage with people of other faiths. This has been referred to in the previous chapter as “Pneumatological inclusivism”.

Dr. V. E. Devadutt’s statement that “it is desirable that the Indian Church should enter into a theological heritage arising from its own grappling with the problems of our faith”,<sup>1</sup> has yet to be adequately applied to the case of Indian Pentecostalism. The reluctance of most Indian Pentecostals to contextualise their faith in this way results in Indian Pentecostalism being compared with other foreign traditions in Indian Christianity - Syrian Orthodoxy, 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant missionaries. Like these, Indian Pentecostalism is perceived as a form of Christianity that has been imported into India from other parts of the world, and remains isolated in Indian society and culture. It is against this background that this thesis has attempted to respond to Dr Devadutt’s challenge by showing how an Indian Pentecostal contextual theology could be developed that by engaging with India’s religious pluralism. In theological terms this challenges Indian Pentecostals to interact with the ideas of indigenous Indian Christian theologians who, from 19<sup>th</sup> century Banerjea onwards, have taken a much more explorative approach in engaging with indigenous religious traditions.

This concluding chapter will be divided into three parts: the first will review the lessons that Pentecostals can learn from Indian Christian theologies of religious

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<sup>1</sup> Devadutt, V. E., op. cit. p.43.

pluralism; the second will assess the significance of the few contributions that Indian Pentecostal theologians have already tried to make to a Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism; and finally, suggestions for further research.

## 8.1 Lessons that Pentecostals can learn from Indian Christian theologies of religious pluralism

The early Syrian Christian community came to India from Western Asia., and although it adapted itself to Hindu culture by accepting to live within the caste system, it made no sustained effort to engage with religious pluralism. Syrian Christian social and cultural accommodation to Indian culture and theological seclusion is a warning for Pentecostals; that lack of theological engagement with social and cultural elements of Hinduism will isolate Pentecostals in a theological ghetto, which is far removed from contextualising their Christian faith in Indian culture.

The case of 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic arrival in India shows that it was not sufficient to interpret the Christian message in Hindu terms, without at the same time addressing the doctrinal content of Christian faith. Pre-modern Roman Catholic doctrine remained a “foreign” expression of the Christian message in India. This, too, is a warning to Indian Pentecostals. In order for the contextualization of Pentecostalism to take place, Indian Pentecostals have to reflect contextually on the nature and content of Christian faith in relation to Indian religious and philosophical traditions.

It has been shown, however, that by regarding Hinduism as having no value, and in wishing to replace it with Christianity, Indian Pentecostals have opted mainly to stand within the exclusive tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff. His confrontational approach to Hinduism was designed and was balanced by the more irenic fulfilment theology of Farquhar. This latter has been of some appeal to the Indian Pentecostal theologians who were examined in Chapter Six of this thesis, where it was argued that, although this opens up new ways for Indian Pentecostalism to engage with Hinduism, it borrows almost entirely from non-Pentecostalist sources of theology, and privileges the Brahmanic traditions of the Hindu Vedanta to the exclusion of the Dalit community from which most Indian Pentecostalists come.



By looking to the theological resources of Pentecostals from other parts of the world, and examining ways in which they are exploring the challenges of religious pluralism, this thesis has focussed on the activity of the Holy Spirit. This takes us to the heart of Pentecostal theology, and gives full weight to the importance of Spirit manifestations as the spiritual fruit of new life in Christ. The thesis has also noted how Indian theologians of the mainline churches have also found in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit innovative ways of relating to other religions, particularly Hinduism. As these theologians explore the spiritual life of Hindus in search for evidences of the fruits of the Spirit, so it has been the argument of this thesis that Pentecostal theology can enrich this endeavour by introducing Pentecostal insights into the economy of the Holy Spirit that mainline theologians generally ignore. For this, as Allan Anderson's research in the context of African Pentecostalism has shown, it is essential to draw on anthropology and sociology in addition to Biblical studies. Pentecostals argue that in exploring these spirits to bring the message of Christ to meet with people of other faiths saving them, healing them, and affirming them.

To recognise the priority of the Holy Spirit in the development of Christian theologies of religious pluralism is not, of course, to ignore the importance of the other Persons of the Godhead in properly Trinitarian theology. The mainline Indian theologians whom we have examined in this thesis, especially Wesley Ariarajah, tend toward a theo-centric approach that affirms the freedom of God to be God, as God of the entire creation. Such creation-orientated theo-centrism respects the absoluteness of God that transcends all expressions of human cognition, and in this sense frees God from particular doctrinal way of understanding God. It recognises, moreover, that God is apprehended in faith relationally and effectively before God is realised cognitively. Faith is itself the gift of the Holy Spirit, and wherever the Spirit operates throughout the entire creation, the Spirit witnesses to God the Creator, and draws people to respond to God in faith. On these grounds it is possible to affirm that neither God nor the Holy Spirit are the "property" – as it were – of any particular religion, place or people, but that all people in all places and all religions can receive the gift of faith, from the same Spirit, in the same God. This theological approach is, we submit, entirely in keeping with the Pentecostal emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the spiritual life of individuals and communities. It rescues popular Pentecostal piety from the danger of concentrating exclusively on Christ in

what may be termed “Christomonism”, while affirming the spiritual reality of faith in God wherever it is found.

To avoid the dangers of Christomonism is not to belittle the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith and Pentecostal theology. It is Jesus whose apprehension of God in faith is reflected in the Bible. Indian Pentecostals like Ambumkayathu and Padinjarekara explores religious pluralism within India in terms of a *logos* theology which sees Christ as the incarnation of *logos* present through all creation. Jesus Christ is the *logos* in human flesh. To use another New Testament metaphor, Jesus is the *ikon* of God who manifests the nature of God in creation and human life. It is the calling of Christians, the followers of Jesus Christ, to become iconic as He – which, according to the New Testament – is possible as we are transformed through grace into the new beings that God in Christ creates. Christ, the *logos* and *ikon* of God, reveals the nature and character of the universal work of God and the Spirit. Christ thus has universal significance for whole humanity, without condition, and without the requirement that peoples of other faith accept him and convert to Christianity.

A Trinitarian approach to religious pluralism therefore emphasises equally, and inter-relatedly, the economies of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To prioritise the economy of the Holy Spirit in Christian engagement with religious pluralism is not to truncate the fullness of Trinitarian theology. It serves, however, to rescue the Christianity from Christic-exclusivism, and by affirming what has in this thesis been termed “Pneumatological inclusivism” it rescues the Church from theological isolation and invites Christians to engage faithfully with the spiritual experience of other religions. The three theologians examined in Part Two identified the Spirit at work in other religions, and cultures in terms of ethical values as found in the fruits of the Spirit. While this is fully in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament, it is – from the point of view of Pentecostalism – inadequate in that it ignores the New Testament witness to the gifts of the Spirit. As Pentecostals embrace these ethical values, they also affirm experience of the Spirit in different areas of life. In other words, for Pentecostals, the life in the Spirit provides an experiential reality of the presence of God and a sense of God being active in the everyday life. It is this that encourages the Pentecostal Christian to explore other religions in search for similar or comparable experiences of the Spirit, especially in

the dimensions of popular religion that is all too often ignored by mainline Christian theologians.

It is these dimensions that Indian Pentecostals most naturally inhabit since, by majority, they come from a Dalit background, and are suspicious of the high traditions of *Vedantic* philosophy and of Christian attraction towards them. Most Indian Pentecostals, being of Dalit background, are themselves poor people. It is for this reason that the thesis has given consideration to what Indian Pentecostalism can learn from Indian liberation theology. Samuel Rayan asserted a universal presence of God's spirit present among the poor in ways God's Spirit is not perceived by the non-poor. In this regard, the poor become God's poor, regardless of religion. Valuable as Rayan's insight is, the danger of such liberative approaches to religious pluralism is that it reduces human community to social and political structures. Pentecostalist theologies of liberation, as evidenced in the work of Solivan, enrich liberation theology by bringing to it an awareness of a spirit world that has the potential for spiritual oppression. Pentecostals believe that living in the life of the Spirit enables them to extraordinary things otherwise impossible and for Pentecostals Christ's Spirit continues to demonstrate his power over malevolent forces that are at work.

## 8.2 Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism

If the following paragraphs suggest ways in which Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism can be developed, based in a full Trinitarian theology that gives priority to what we have termed “Pneumatological inclusivism”, this thesis encourages Indian Pentecostals to go considerably further than those examined in Chapter Six who limit their theological inquiry to a *logos* theology that does not extend to the wider activity of the Spirit. Relying on a Trinitarian Christology that affirms the particularity of the Christ event with the universality of the *logos* and of the Spirit opens up new possibilities for a theology of religion and leads Pentecostals to build upon.

Pneumatological inclusivism recognises the Spirit and the *logos* outside the Church creating, renewing, and sustaining the activity of God in the world. Thus the question is not whether the Spirit is present among people of other faiths, but how one discerns the Spirit of God in the religious traditions of other people. The Indian Christian theologians examined in Part Two accentuated the economy of the Spirit as identified with the positive ethical values. As Pentecostals welcome the fruits of the Spirit in ethical terms developed by mainline theologians, they highlight the manifestations of the Spirit. In so doing, the goal is to identify where God has revealed Himself and being open to the possibility that God’s Spirit influences people and culture that need to be explored.

Pneumatological inclusivism also addresses evil spirits that are at work in human history. The three Indian Christian theologians in Part Two explore the activity of the Holy Spirit in social and political dimensions, neglecting the concern of spiritual oppression. Pentecostals are able to counteract this limited understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit by taking seriously the reality of spiritual world. Pentecostals are aware of the good as well as evil among spirits. They can affirm the Holy Spirit in positive ways working in popular religions but can also refute from negative side of spirits.

While Samartha accentuate fruits of the Spirit in ethical terms, Pentecostals emphasises the spiritual manifestations of life in the Spirit. Pentecostals are able to

draw not just on ethical principles but actual experiences of the Holy Spirit that empower people with new spiritual skills of healing, visions and prophecy. A Pentecostal approach takes seriously the religious experiences of the people. In so doing, a Pentecostal engagement becomes an exploration of the Spirit. This enables Pentecostals to explore the activity of the Spirit including Dalit, *Bhakti*, and *Jnana* traditions. In so doing Pentecostals are more able than mainline Indian Christian theologians to bridge Hindu and Dalit dimensions of religious pluralism in India.

Pneumatological inclusivism invites us to understand and appreciate the Holy Spirit dwelling among us, in all cultures, guiding and directing us to participate in the Reign of God. The gifts of the Spirit are gifts for the building up of the Reign of God and as such are signs of the Spirit at work in the life of the community. One can then, with Amaladoss, urge Christians to see mission not as a confrontation against the religions, but a partnership with those within all religions who manifest the Spirit, joining with them in a common call to confront all forms of oppression, spiritual and material; individual and collective which dehumanize the poor. This is what makes Pentecostal inquiry into religious pluralism valuable in pluralistic context.

### 8.3 Suggestions for further research

In providing a basis for a Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism, this thesis hopes to have made an original contribution to the study of religious pluralism in India, as the first academic thesis on this subject. It has attempted to contribute to the development of an Indian Pentecostal theology through its argument on the issue of Dalit world-view. It also hopes to contribute towards a positive dialogue between Pentecostals and people of other faiths.

If this thesis has succeeded in providing a basis for an Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism, it does not claim to be a final work. Rather, it hopes to stimulate further academic interest in study of Pentecostalism in India. It must be recognized in this conclusion that there are several areas of further research concerning Indian Pentecostal theology of religious pluralism, four of which will be briefly identified.

The first recognizes that the study of Dalit religions must be fully developed by Pentecostal scholars – sociologists, anthropologists as well as theologians. There is evidence that in recent times Indian Christian theologians have begun to evaluate Dalit religions, and this promises to provide a creative dimension to Pentecostal theological engagement with religious pluralism. This thesis offers no more than a prolegomenon to that endeavour.

A second area of further research would be to examine Pentecostal and Dalit identity. Fundamental to Pentecostal engagement with people of other faiths is the need to contextualise the Christian message in relation to religious traditions of the Dalits. This is a Christian perspective of religious pluralism. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of Dalit theologians beginning to evaluate the Pentecostal religious experience from a Dalit perspective. Therefore the Indian Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism needs to be continued and deepened, with active research on this topic.

The third area of research arises in regards to the study of Pentecostalism in India. From its inception, Pentecostalism has attracted Dalit and non-Dalit converts.

However, Pentecostal Dalits have been marginalised by the Syrian Pentecostals in terms of leadership and administrative functions. Furthermore, often in formulating the history of Pentecostalism, the efforts of the Syrian Pentecostals are highlighted while the activities of Dalit Pentecostals are marginalised.

In this connection, the role of Pentecostal women must be given due representation as well. Women in Indian society and Indian Church continue to experience social, economical and political marginalisation. Despite this, native Pentecostal women have played a significant part in the growth of the Pentecostal Church in India. Therefore, any future study of Pentecostalism in India must give proper account to the work of Dalits and women Pentecostals.

Finally, this thesis has attempted to provide a basis for Pentecostal engagement with religious pluralism rooted in the religious and cultural traditions of India. One of the questions that arise from this contextual theology is how it relates to other contextual theologies in India. Contextual theology takes seriously and engages with the realities and experiences of the local people. At the same time, contextual theology must be in dialogue with other theologies in order to avoid theological isolation. It is important therefore, that future research on Indian Christian theology should develop a comparative frame of reference with contextual theologies in other parts of India and South Asia.



## Epilogue

The issues taken up in this study are rooted in, and emerge from the cultural, religious and philosophical context which has nurtured and sustained the author's personal theological reflection as an Indian Pentecostal Christian. The thesis is the academic expression of a personal journey. It does not claim to be a final work. Rather, it hopes to stimulate discussion, especially among the Indian Pentecostal community within which the author ministers, and to provide a resource for ministerial and theological reflection among Indian Pentecostal theologians in their future response to religious pluralism.

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